The CUTTERS

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The CUTTERS

by

Bess Streeter Aldrich

Author of
"The Rim of the Prairie,"
"Mother Mason," etc.

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THE BLAKISTON COMPANY—PHILADELPHIA

SOUTHMEN BAPTIST CHURCH

MONROE AVE. BAPTIST CHURCH

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THE CUTTERS

CHAPTER I

GUESTS

THE Cutter family was eating dinner. It was not a softly lighted, cut glass, evening affair. It was a sunshiny, stone china, noon meal, with pieces of apple pie sitting handily by each plate. Common folks, you see—the Cutters. As for the dessert, Nell Cutter would have had to jump up and get it, or have asked Opal Peterson, who worked for her, to do it, for Opal was sitting familiarly at the table with the others. So often in a small town your maid is no servant at all, but a real neighborly human being.

The Cutter family was good-sized. Many people speak largely of their family circle, when in reality it is only a triangle: a father, a mother, and one lonesome little youngster. But the Cutters formed a real circle: Ed and

Nell, the parents; Josephine, aged twelve; Craig, nine; Nicholas, seven; baby Leonard, and Gramma Cutter.

Yes, circle it was; a circle with seven points in the circumference from which cords of love, like invisible radii, stretched to the center, the rambling one-storied cottage in which was housed that intangible but enduring, shadowy but abiding thing—*Home.* There is still reason to believe that the centrifugal force of its influence is greater than that given out by clubs and lodges and community organizations.

This noon the children had just had their plates filled and were doing a very creditable job of consuming as much of their father's income as possible, when that father said casually—men are so adroit—"Nell, I hear we're going to have some company."

Everybody but the baby looked at him. "Keplars!" he answered their questioning glances. "From Chicago!"

"Keplars!" Nell repeated. *"B. J.?"* It was as though she said "Wales! The *Prince* of Wales?"

"Yes; next Friday."

To be sure, a hand grenade would have split up the furniture and made unmendable cavities in the floor and ceiling, but otherwise it could not have been more of a shock to Nell Cutter. From the children there came an immediate shrapnel-shell volley of questions: "Who are they, papa?" . . . "What they coming *here* for?"

Their father gave them the information, which was already known to his wife, that Mr. Keplar was a very wealthy man for whom he occasionally looked after business connected with some farm land; and that when he had been in Chicago once, Mr. Keplar had taken him home to dinner to "a house as big as a hotel," where a butler had waited on him. Then he added for Nell's benefit, that as the Keplars were coming through in their car and stopping on business he had asked them to stay at the house overnight.

The children continued to ply him with a spatter of questions, and when they could think of nothing more to ask they began all over

again: "Well, who *is* he?" "What's he coming *for?*"

But it was Nell Cutter with whom the news played havoc. Life goes tranquilly on, and then all of a sudden we are snatched out of our ruts and are made to realize how very comfortable were those easy old grooves.

"Ed Cutter!" Nell exploded. "What shall we *do?* The elegance they are used to! Where can I put them?"

"Oh, we can double up somehow," was Ed's cheerful if somewhat indefinite solution. Then he added, "The trouble is with you, Nell; you're always too fussy."

"Fussy!" Nell was plainly sarcastic. "Of course we could put a double cot in the vegetable cellar."

The meal ended with Nell still astounded at the news and the children blissfully forgetting it in the serious problem of going back to school. Ed, having caused a tornado to be turned loose in his erstwhile semipeaceful home, washed his hands of the whole devastating affair and departed to his law office.

Mentally stunned, his wife sat and viewed the ruins. But not for long can mothers of four sit and view anything. So she pulled herself together and faced her problem. How could she entertain for twenty-four hours in her modest home a millionaire and his wife, neither of whom she had ever seen?

She looked about her. Immediately she began to see her home with the eyes of Mrs. B. J. Keplar, and, behold, it was no longer a home but only a house. Old, rambling, it took on a new shabbiness, a threadbare condition that, through love for it, she had been unaware existed. We become used to furniture, ornaments, all the inanimate things that go to make up our little environment. A crack in a table is no particular disfigurement, but a line in an old friend's face. So Nell Cutter looked about her and discovered a multitude of discrepancies: a broken clock hand, a shabby chair, a scratch on a writing desk.

This was Monday. It followed that there were five days in which to get the house in order. The children, too, must be held to

stricter account with their manners. That very noon, Nicky had gone after a slice of bread as though he were coming in to first base.

Her work began, and it was cylonic in scope. She hired an extra woman, and together with Opal they turned the house upside down for cleaning. She worked early and late in a frenzy of haste. She painted the porch chairs and made new chintz covers for them. She sent to Dale City for grapefruit and head lettuce and a specially prepared dressing. She bought a rose-colored down quilt that she could not afford. She washed and ironed and mended and scrubbed.

The children grew sick of the name Keplar. Their mother's taut nerves made her irritable, sarcastic. "Josephine," she would say, "for goodness' sake! when the Keplars come, don't go around singing at the top of your voice. Save those highest notes for Galli-Curci." Or "Senses! Craig! Get that loose tooth out before the Keplars come. It makes you look idiotic to keep running your tongue over it."

There was much conversation relative to the place where the guests would sleep, for even though the house boasted four bedrooms, you cannot divide four by seven and have anything left.

"Mama, can't Nick and I sleep in the Keplars' big auto and let them have our room?" was Craig's contribution to the plans.

"Ho! Ho!" With that delicate tactfulness for which she was noted, Josephine threw cold water on the suggestion. "I must say they'd like your room, with dried-up crumbly butterflies, and an old wasp's nest, and—"

"Ya! Ya! How about yours, with a lot of silly movie girls all grinning like chessy cats?" And the Tong war was on.

Eventually it turned out that the guests were to have Josephine's room, Josephine take the boys'—though she predicted nightmares—and the boys sleep on a cot in their parents' room.

As the days hurried by, Nell Cutter's physical strength became strained to a point that warped her mental outlook. Naturally cheer-

ful and contented, there grew in her, as she worked furiously on, a resentment that so much work was necessary to cover up the weak points of her household. In her mind she began to find fault with her ordinary life, to complain about their income, to pick flaws in Ed.

Ed was a good man, she told herself but he was slow and conservative. He was a plodder. They had been married fifteen years now, and if they were ever going to be rich there ought to be evidence of it by this time. To be sure, some of the folks in town called Ed's income good. Well, *she* didn't. What was that by the side of real wealth? Ed was too easy. He wasn't aggressive enough. Why didn't he get rich like other men no brighter or better? B. J. Keplar, for instance. He'd made his money in some sort of mining. Well, why hadn't Ed done that? Why couldn't he have swung big deals, made real money? For one thing, he thought of other people too much, did too much for the community without pay. He was always harping about "duty" and

"service to others." Well, didn't he owe his own family some things first? *She'd* have liked nicer things. She'd have known so well how to choose them. She would have had a drawing-room with Oriental rugs . . . tapestry-hung. A dining room in blues, Delft and a lighter shade, with a daring splash of crimson.

How she would have reveled in wealth and all the ease it could bring! Ed's antiquated joke about her having a champagne taste on a beer income was nothing funny. It was *tragedy,* that's what it was. And the children . . . how they tied her down to home! Of course she was glad she had them, but, just the same, they sapped at her strength, monopolized her very soul. If she could just get away from them occasionally, get out and be free from responsibility! Like Mrs. Keplar! Free to have a personality of her own again!

So was Nell Cutter tossed about for five days in the seething, turbulent waters of Resentment that flow into the River of Envy.

Friday arrived, a sweet-scented morning in

May. Nell did not notice the weather. She was baking and putting the last touches to an immaculate, shining house. Over and over she charged Opal and the children what they were to do. Almost did she put into their mouths the words they were to speak. It seemed to the harassed family like the day for a play in which they were all to take stiff and stilted parts.

At noon they ate lunch on the kitchen table. Nell did not sit down. Her head ached. It seemed to her that the family would never get through eating. "Aren't you through, boys?" she kept asking Craig and Nick. "Ed, what's the matter with them, anyway? They're perfect gluttons. There's no sense in eating as though their stomachs were constructed like bottomless pits."

It was a confused, horribly noisy noon. Craig took occasion to change lines on his fishing poles, messing up with hooks and sinkers the back porch, which Opal had fairly peeled. Josephine brought her grammar and caught her mother on the fly: "Mama, look here a

minute: 'The party arrived at the camping ground.' Is 'camping' a participle? If it *isn't* I don't know what participles *are.*" Ed chose this auspicious noon as the one on which to bring home a little new grindstone, fasten it on the kitchen table and sharpen the butcher knife. The gr-gr-gr of the wheel nearly drove her frantic. Nick kept jigging near her until in her irritability she slapped him—this mother who did not believe in slapping. And when Gramma said, gently, reprovingly, "I guess you forgot to steep my tea, didn't you?" she could have slapped Gramma, too; Gramma, whom she really loved.

With the children back in school the play moved forward quickly. At three o'clock there was a hitch. Ed phoned that the Keplars would arrive in Meadows on the four-thirty train, as their chauffeur was staying with the car for repairs in Dale City. That necessitated getting out their own car.

"I must say this will look *dinky* to them," Nell observed frankly as she stepped in to go to the station.

Ed was one of those men whose religion, politics, and characters could be assailed with less disastrous results than casual insults to their cars brought forth. "There's none better," he answered hotly. He spent the entire drive to the station in a defense of it which the Supreme Court should have heard. Nell did not listen.

When the Keplars stepped from the train, Nell knew they were all that millionaires should be. Mr. Keplar was the typical big, prosperous-looking business man. But it was upon Mrs. Keplar that her eyes fell enviously. Large, impressive, her heavy figure was molded into a severely plain suit. From the tips of her shoes to the top of the smart hat, which fairly grew on her soft, lustrous gray hair, she was perfection. She had distinction, poise, a queen's carriage.

"Well, she'll have a chance once in her life to see what an ordinary home is like," thought Nell as she shook hands.

Mrs. Keplar's manner, too, was gracious; but to Nell's sensitive imagination, it seemed

slightly aloof, vaguely condescending. "Snobbish," she said to herself.

On the way to the house Nell said, "We're living in rather a quaint old cottage now, until we build." She hated herself for it, but to save her life she could not have kept from uttering it.

Arrived at the house, the guests were introduced to Gramma and such of the children as were visible, Nick having ensconced himself in the cob house with a field glass, which he was using to advantage through a knot hole.

Mrs. Keplar seemed to fit in about as oil mixes with water. To herself, Nell said that she, too, could have appeared aristocratic and poised at the Keplars' beautiful home. Also, she could be common and ordinary when alone with Gramma and the children and Opal. But she could not be a Chinese go-between. She positively did not know how to transfuse two such opposite elements as her guest and her own folks. She was no melting pot.

The dinner hour passed off fairly well, in spite of a few trying details. Opal rushed

in at the back door the last minute, with her ordinarily neat hair arranged as though she were to play the lead in Madame Butterfly, her trepidation over waiting on table bolstered up by the presence of a rhinestone pin, a lavallière, a bracelet, and a wrist watch.

It was something of a shock to find that Mr. Keplar was dieting, and that there were only three things on the table that he could eat. Craig, in a noble effort to represent himself as a past master in politeness, drew a glance of disgust from his mother by jabbing at an olive as though he were spearing salmon in the Yukon. But it was Gramma who really made the worst break. To Nell's chagrin, she said in her gentle low voice, "When we were all new here in the state, we used to have company so much easier than folks do nowadays. We used to visit back and forth so much. We'd just set out an extra plate or two without any big fuss . . . just make a few more biscuits and get out our choicest clover honey. And such good times as we had! I remember once when the Morrises came, we

took the bed down so we could have more room; took the bureau out, too, and set it up against a tree, and a hen got up on it and laid an egg in my workbasket."

Of course it was all very horrid and common, thought Nell. But she was really too tired to care. They would go away to-morrow afternoon, and she need never see them again. So she developed a sort of callousness over the whole affair.

Soon after dinner Craig and Nick stuffed to the point of torpidity, went to bed. Nell saw Opal and Josephine well started on the dishes, and then excused herself and slipped off to her bedroom to put the baby to bed.

Scarcely had she unbuttoned his little rompers before she heard a tap and "May I come in, too?" from her guest. Outwardly gracious, she assented. Inwardly, she was boiling. It was the one room in the whole house that she decidedly did not want her to enter. There were several cracks in the wall paper, and the curtains, though freshly laundered, were old and mended.

"It looks like Ward B, in a hospital," she tried to laugh.

It did look the part. On one side of the big bed stood the baby's crib, and on the other the double cot that had been brought in for the boys. They were asleep in it now; Craig, long and lanky, lay quietly, Nick sprawled out like a flying squirrel.

"Will we wake them?" Mrs. Keplar asked.

"You couldn't with firecrackers!" their mother answered.

There was room for only one chair, and Nell was holding the baby in that, so Mrs. Keplar sat down on the edge of the bed. She looked like aristocracy paying a duty call to a peasant's cottage.

"I wanted to see you put the baby to bed," she said, and Nell imagined she detected a difference in her voice, a wistfulness, perhaps. Ill at ease, the mother covered it by talking trivialities to the baby.

Then, abruptly, the unwelcome visitor said, "I'm glad you're like you are. I felt timid about meeting you."

"Meeting *me?*"

"Yes. You see, when your husband was at our house he spoke about meeting you at college. I remembered it. I never had but a little schooling myself, and so it makes me backward. I have to be so careful to watch myself when I talk. Grammar, you know, and the things I never studied."

Nell found herself too astonished to reply, and the visitor went calmly on: "Just a little country school is all I ever went to, so I've always had to work hard to make a creditable appearance. B. J. doesn't like me to tell it, though," she added naïvely. And Nell was to have her first insight into the domineering character of Mr. Keplar.

"I lived in a little mountain town when I met B. J.," the woman went on, "Katie O'Malley, my name was. I guess I don't have to tell you my nationality," she smiled across at Nell.

The woman had changed, unmistakably. Something had dropped from her, something assumed, a manner . . . a tone. She was the

same carefully coiffured, manicured, tailored person. But The Thing had fallen. Out there she had been poised, aloof, noncommunicative. In here she was intimate in manner, confidential in tone, talkative even to the point of garrulity. Nell had a swift vision of her in calico and sunbonnet gossiping across a fence. Which was the real personality? Which the assumed? Nell had heard of people posing before strangers. But to pose before one's husband, and drop into one's natural self with others! It seemed too incredible.

"There were ten of us in the family," she went on friendlily. "I have a poem that just fits us. It goes:

"When we were little children we had a quare wee house
Away up in the heather by the head o' Brabla' burn.
The hares we'd see them scootin', and we'd hear the crowin' grouse,
And when we'd all be in at night ye'd not get room to turn!"

She laughed pleasantly; then she sobered. "Well, well, they're all scattered. Some are dead. Some I don't know where they are. I haven't seen any of them but Dennie for years. B. J.," she said apologetically, "B. J. had a . . . misunderstanding with them."

It did not take Nell long to translate that bit of information. She could see the dictatorial man laying down the command that his wife was to have nothing more to do with her kinsfolk. Evidently he was not only master of her fate but captain of her soul.

"So you can see how nice I think it is for you to have the grandma with you. She makes me think of my mother.

"Wherever she was was comfort, and the all
that she had for sharin',
The water she gave at a well was better than
drink at a fair.
Never a daughter she had with half her wit
and darin',
With the like of her rosy cheeks or the curl
of her silver hair.

"You must think I'm foolish about poetry. Well, I am. It's my hobby. Irish poetry. I hunt the bookstores and magazines for it. There's something in it that satisfies something in *me*."

There was a little more relative to the subject, and then, "I envy you your home. It's a real home, not so many thousand cubic feet of masonry. When we were married we lived in two rooms back of a store. They didn't have any names. We just called them 'the room,' and 'the other room.' B. J. was getting forty-five dollars a month. Then he got a raise and we moved to a cottage. It had five rooms, and it looked like a castle to me. I can shut my eyes and see it yet. I suppose the main reason I like to think of it is because the babies were born there."

"Oh!" Nell gave a little gasp. "You've had children?"

"Two . . . a boy and a girl."

"And they—?"

"Yes, both of them. Scarlet fever." The first bitterness the woman had shown crept

into her face and voice. "We exchanged them for copper."

To Nell's incredulous expression she answered, "It amounts to the same thing. B. J. took us away where he had a mine staked out. When they took sick it was days before we could get any medical aid. If we hadn't gone out there, it wouldn't have happened.

"My baby had just learned to wave her hand and call me. . . ." The bitterness had passed. Nothing remained but grief. "My boy was toddling all around. He had a little horse that he carried everywhere . . . a little spotted horse with a gray tail. He even had it in his hands when—" She broke into a low anguished sob, the painful sob of a self-restrained woman who seldom cried.

Nell was crying, too, the hot, gushing tears of a younger woman, half-sympathetic, half-joyous for the feel of the little body that lay relaxed now in her arms. For a long time they sat silent, bound with a common bond of sympathy.

Then Nell rose to put the baby in his bed.

Mrs. Keplar had to edge her way out between the two beds to make room for her. When he was covered the visitor laid her soft, well-kept hand on him. "Well," she said, "he will grow away from you. But when they live only in your heart they always stay babies."

As the two stepped out into the living-room, Mr. Keplar was saying. "In a case like that, Cutter, you've got to be aggressive. You've got to ride roughshod over every one and everything."

Nell saw him now with critical eyes. He looked hard, unyielding, cruel. She glanced at Ed, standing there in his last year's suit. Not a child in the community but would bring him his troubles, not an old person in the countryside but would ask his aid. "Get Ed Cutter to help you." How many times she had heard it, and scolded at Ed's ready response. Suddenly she was proud of him.

She looked at the woman. There it was . . . the change! She had not been mistaken. The woman had changed, had drawn around her a subtle mantle of aloofness, an invisible

mask of condescension. She had made herself the kind of woman her husband had wanted her to be.

When the house was quiet Ed said in their bedroom, "Swell folks!" He had to whisper on account of the baby and the thin walls.

"I love *her*," Nell whispered back; "but don't you ever quote that old B. J. to me again. I know now what his initials stand for: Blue—Jay, . . . robbing other folks' nests to feather his own. The old *coot!*"

But already Ed was half asleep. His last semi-intelligible words sounded like "Better have voffles for breffus."

The morning passed quickly, with Ed and Mr. Keplar in the country. Nell's nerves were no longer strung like fiddle strings. She was as calm as an old shoe. Mrs. Keplar, with a gingham apron around her ample waist, wiped dishes for Opal and mixed the salad for Nell, inspected the boys' bird houses, and advised Josephine about her zinnia beds.

It was when they were all standing by the big car saying good-by that Mrs. Keplar sud-

denly thought of asking Josephine to go back to Chicago with them. "We'll stop on our way back next week and get her, if you will let her go."

"Sure!" put in Mr. Keplar. "We'll show her things to make her eyes pop out."

But Ed and Nell made no promise. They said it was all very sudden, that it was lovely of them, and that they would let them know the decision.

The car, a veritable Pullman for size, slipped away. As it glided up the shady street toward the country Mr. Keplar was already discussing route plans with the chauffeur. But Mrs. Keplar, looking back at the little family group, fluttered her handkerchief as long as she was in sight—a lonely old woman with nothing in the world but money and memories.

As the car was lost to view, Nell Cutter turned toward her family to be confronted by Josephine, a red-faced, bristling Josephine.

"Don't make me go," the girl exploded. "Say right now I don't have to go."

"Why, Josephine!" Her mother was astonished. "It would be such an experience."

"You mean spend a summer with two old folks in an enormous house with a *butler?*" She spoke as though butlers were disgraceful adjuncts to any household. "And leave all my girl friends and the picnic suppers in the clover meadow . . . and my flower beds . . . and the wrens!"—she threw out her arms in an unconsciously dramatic gesture—"and all this lovely outdoors?"

Her mother started to reply with, "Why, Josephine, of course, if you feel that way about it—" But Josephine was evidently not through. Like a tragedy queen's youthful understudy, she broke in: "And leave my precious *home* . . . and my own *parents* . . . and the *boys* . . . and *Gramma* . . . and the sweetest *baby* in the *world?* Why, when I got back home the baby wouldn't even *know* me." She swooped upon him and gathered him to her, the personification of potential parentage, the picture of embryonic motherhood.

Across the head of their eldest born, Mr. and

Mrs. Edward Everett Cutter looked at each other silently, significantly. "And to think," said Josephine's father, "there are mature people less able to distinguish between things worth while and the passing show."

"If you mean *me,*" said Josephine's mother blithely, "you're *away off your base.*"

Together the family walked up the grassy old brick walk to the porch: Ed and Nell, and the children, and Gramma. The May sunshine flickered in and out across the pattern of leaf shadows. There were lilacs on the big bush by the steps, plumelike, smothering sweet. The doors of the house stood wide open. The rooms beyond looked fresh and clean. The old furnishings seemed friendly, hospitable.

"Guess I won't go back to the office," Ed said cheerfully. "Might as well change my clothes and get after that onion bed."

Nell dropped into a porch chair, a hastily-painted chair, gay with chintz. "Well, there's one thing to be thankful for," she announced to them all; "I'll at least have a little rest from this eternal cooking. We've got enough rolls

and cake and cold sliced ham to last a meal or two."

Nick looked down from the top of a porch pillar, where he was hanging by an arm and leg like a friendly baboon. "No, you ain't. Not a piece," he admitted frankly. "Craig and I thought you was through with 'em, so we et 'em all up."

CHAPTER II

REVERSION TO TYPE

A FEW days later Number Four (the ten o'clock passenger) wheezed tardily, like an asthmatic old man, up to the Meadows station, and pulled out as soon as three people had alighted in the dark and the rain.

From this statement you will no doubt deduct that Meadows, the abode of the Cutters, was not a city. And you will be quite right. It was a small town in one of the Mid-West states, where there are almost as many hogs as automobiles. It had some pleasant homes, a good school, five churches, and a few blocks of stores.

The street on which the stores faced was called by an extremely common name. No one was ashamed of this, for every one knew that a few thousand famous folks had come out of similar towns. And Nazareth was not

metropolitan. It is quite possible that the street which runs on either side of the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations is called Main.

One-third of the incoming passengers this drizzling night was Nell Cutter. The Meadows *Mirror,* in its next issue would say that Mrs. Ed Cutter spent Friday shopping in Dale City. It sounds like a small, uninteresting item. But if you were the mother of four, if you had not been shopping in Dale City for seven months, if in that time your wildest orgies had been two or three kensingtons ("kensington" being the Meadows equivalent of "sewing circle"), the day would have taken on the nature of an event.

Ed Cutter, big and solid and substantial-looking, stood under the eaves of the dripping station holding an umbrella and a flashlight, like a masculine version of the Goddess of Liberty. He grinned a whole-hearted, cheerful welcome at the sight of his trim-looking wife. Many a woman has been met at the pier

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after a transatlantic voyage with less sincere gratitude for her return.

Simultaneously the two said, "Well?" The conversation of long-married people is often carried on in shorthand. By that one lone syllable Ed Cutter meant, "What kind of a day did you have?" and Nell was inquiring, "What has happened at home?" For of course in fourteen hours anything might have happened: broken bones, company, mad dogs—anything.

Ed could think of nothing except that the Ball administrator had come to have him start probating the old man's will, and they had had new peas for dinner.

But Nell had more than that to tell. In fact, she was full to the bursting point of news and ideas. So as they walked up the street under the soggy elms she did most of the talking. She had been to the Dale City Woman's Club in the afternoon. She had nearly gone to a matinée instead, but very luckily she chose the club. She had heard a Mrs. Johnson Peabody-Mills from the East give an address. It had been wonderful, a perfect inspiration.

Mrs. Peabody-Mills was lecturing under the auspices of some organization, The Order of Perfect Parenthood or Trained Motherhood, or something—Nell wasn't sure of the title. Ed ought to have heard her. She was so pretty and bright and animated . . . the mother of three charming children, too.

Ed made his first masculine inquiry: "Who said they were?"

"Well, *she* did," Nell admitted grudgingly, but added confidently, "I can believe it, though, for their mother was so lovely. And she's brought them up herself . . . no nurse for *her* . . . by what she calls the *reasoning* method. She reasons with them about everything, you know, . . . treats them as though they were mature."

Ed threw his second little dipper of cold water. "Who's got 'em now?" There was a suggestion of ice in the water.

"Well, of course, a nurse, a *trained* nurse, has them just now"—Nell was a little provoked at Ed—"while their mother makes this western trip. But she's only out this way

because it seemed her *duty* to help other mothers."

Nell sensed that Ed's logical mind was noting a fragile plank in the lady's platform, so she hurried on: "She was *very* much opposed to corporeal punishment. She made it so clear. It just made me *sick* to think I'd ever spanked the children. She gave illustrations of the workings of the child mind, and they sounded so reasonable. She said we seem to children just like monstrous animals when we punish them, and of course it must be true. I'd really known most of the things she said, for I had child-study in college. But one gets slack, and she certainly brought it all back to me. Ed, I know that with patience and reasoning I won't need ever to touch the children again. I'm going to start right to-morrow and be more patient, and treat them as though they were *reasoning* beings."

Ed was quite willing. He was one of those good, substantial American fathers who look very thoroughly after the ways of their business but who are rather like guests in their

own home. Josephine adored him, the baby cried after him, and he was his boys' boon companion. But it was their mother who really made them toe the mark.

"And here's something I forgot to tell you." Nell was all animation. "That new Mrs. Ramsey attended the meeting, too, and she and I together succeeded in getting Mrs. Peabody-Mills's promise to come out here next Thursday and speak to our own club. It will be such a treat and such help to these small-town mothers."

They were on the last block now and the light shone in the windows of home. Nell hastened her steps unconsciously. That low, rambling house set well back in the big yard was her world.

There are people who say the lives of such women are narrow. They are not narrow. They are as wide as sympathy and as broad as love. They reach from the depths of little graves to the end of the stars. A person may encircle the globe with mind open only to bodily comfort. Another may live his life on

a sixty-foot lot and listen to the voices of the universe. As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he!

In the house Nell went immediately, without removing her hat, to the room where the baby slept. She bent over him, listened to his breathing, dropped a kiss on his fat hand and removed a little quilt. Gramma in her anxiety over his welfare had covered him too warmly.

Then she stepped into Josephine's room. By the light of the living room she could see her daughter sleeping, a pair of ten-cent earrings, large turkey-red, flamboyant, screwed on her ears, a mirror fallen from her relaxed hand. The eternal feminine, sympathized the mother.

From there she went to the boys' room. There they both were, apparently with the required number of arms and legs. It was further noticeable that the pair resembled a white boy and a mulatto. Craig was obviously a well-scrubbed Anglo-Saxon. Nick she recognized from his general size and appear-

ance but not through any definite sight of his features.

The casual onlooker would have been satisfied: one boy had simply gone to bed dirty and one had not. But the sleuthlike instincts of motherhood told her that something was suspiciously wrong in Craig's absolute and unusual cleanliness. She turned the bedclothes down.

"I thought so," she nodded. He had gone to bed in his underclothes, a proceeding he had long threatened, "to save time." Just why he had scrubbed to the point of nearly skinning himself, in the hope of detracting from his misdemeanor, is one of the peculiar and devious twists of the child mind which the mere adult may not follow.

Nell Cutter stood looking down at the sturdy bodies of her little sons. Well, she would be more kind, more just, give them the very best that was in her. Never again would she touch them to punish. Flesh of her flesh, they should have all the chance in the world to grow into reasoning and reasonable creatures,

their initiative developed, their originality directed.

For two or three days the Cutter household ran along fairly well. Even a thrown wagon wheel stays precisely upright from sheer velocity for the distance of a few yards. Then things began to go wrong.

Now, it becomes necessary to insert here that the Cutter family, due to the various and ardent interests of its offspring, lived in a state of perpetual enthusiasms. Whether other children were as changeable as her own Nell Cutter did not know. What she did know was that the members of her tribe would live for a period with the most impassioned eagerness for some cause, think of nothing, talk of nothing but its immediate interest only to have that interest quite suddenly die down and flicker out like the last feeble sizzle of a piece of punk.

They rode on waves of excitement, as it were, with each wave a different interest. Their lives were one constant crescendo and diminuendo. A diagram of their enthusiasms

would have looked like a government chart of temperatures, or an erratic grain market.

It worried their mother. "What shall we do about it, Ed?" she would complain. "They remind me of an old Mr. Hensley who used to live near us when I was a girl. I *know* he changed occupations oftener than he did his shirt."

"Oh, boys are like that," was the head-of-the-family's complacent rejoinder. "I guess a boy's will is going to be the wind's will as long as there are boys."

Just that spring there had been a prolonged enthusiasm for maple sap on the part of the sons of Cutter. The boys had tapped their own trees, borrowed the use of others from the more generous of the neighbors, and rented a few from one youthful Shylock. They had taken every kind of a receptacle from the house which a long-suffering mother would allow, and a few which escaped her eagle eye. In the midst of this inundation of maple liquid they heard about a boy who made a vast fortune (or was about to make a vast fortune)

by selling bluing. And, presto! the unemptied sap pails dripped clammily on passers-by while the erstwhile maple-sugar merchants pored over enticing literature about the bluing market.

This indigo-hued adventure had been succeeded by one mighty enthusiasm for keeping chickens. The boys had worked diligently on the chicken fence, and gone through the hazardous feat of purchasing four old hens and setting them. They fairly camped by them through the incubation period and for a few weeks watched over the lively results with rapt attention. Then, lo! the boys of the neighborhood started a baseball team, and the daily conversation dropped with a dull thud from eggs and grit and chick feed to bats and base hits and home runs. Once more had a Cutter enthusiasm died an unnatural death.

So in the days that followed Nell Cutter's return from Dale City she found her greatest task consisted in getting the boys to attend dutifully to the discarded chickens. "Cut your grass now for the chickens," she would tell

them a dozen times a day, to be met with a volley of excuses.

On Monday following her trip she reminded them patiently of their duty. For several quarter-hour stretches she reasoned with them collectively and individually. With alacrity each always assured her that it was the other one's turn. By night, when the grass had been finally amputated from its roots, she was worn out.

On Tuesday, after more philosophical reasoning, gentle persuasion, and patient inducements, the boys put forth feeble efforts to cast some grass into the chicken yard. There were fifty chickens, but the total clover and blue-grass crop that day consisted of a handful that would have fitted comfortably into Nell's best cut-glass vase.

On Wednesday there was no grass cut at all, approximately one-third of the day being given over to heated discussions concerning whose turn it was to perform the stupendous task.

Thursday was club day. It turned out to

be unusually hot, one of those humid days known in the Mid-West as "cracking good corn weather." Opal Peterson had gone to her church picnic. Concurrent with this state of affairs, Josephine developed a tragedy-air aversion to assisting with the work. Instead, she spent half the morning ransacking every isolated nook and corner in the vain endeavor to find a pocketbook containing real and personal property to the extent of fourteen cents, which she frankly and unhesitatingly accused the boys of taking. They, in turn, dragged from their hiding places various and sundry recollections of evil things Josephine had done to them in the past. Altogether pandemonium reigned in the usual semi-peaceful, if noisy, household.

The time between dinner and club consisted of one hundred and fifty of the most strenuous minutes Nell Cutter had ever put in. Added to her other duties, she had to assist Gramma to get into her new white dress, as Gramma was going to the club meeting, too. After a display of temper Josephine grudgingly wiped

dishes and promised to take care of the baby while they were gone. Then Nell began again on the question of cutting grass. "It's too hot now," the boys wailed. But they would do it soon; in fact, they would do it while she was at the club. It would be in the chicken yard, honest it would, a scad of it, when she got back.

As they talked fluently, volubly, their mother surveyed them as with the eye of a stranger. They were dirty. They had on soiled waists and overalls. They wore disgusting red handkerchiefs around their necks and tin revolvers protruded from sagging hip pockets. When she insisted on a rigorous cleaning before she departed, they refused peremptorily to change their blissful state of hobodom. She felt too tired to combat their robust wills.

When Nell and Gramma arrived at the club meeting, Mrs. Johnson Peabody-Mills was already there under the ponderous escort of the new Mrs. Ramsey. Yes, indeed, Mrs. Mills remembered Mrs. Cutter and the interest which she had taken in child psychology. Nell thought a little wearily that much water had

flowed under the bridge since she had last listened to Mrs. Mills. Also much grass had grown . . . and was *still growing*.

She sat down wearily in one corner and looked over the room. Others besides herself looked tired. Mrs. Horner and Minnie Raymond. She wondered how they managed their children. Little Mrs. Marks was there with Jimmie, Junior. She looked fagged, too. Jimmie kept whining and mauling his mother's hair and nose. Mrs. Ramsey looked fresh. Well, *she* didn't have any children. . . . And Mrs. Parkham and Charlotte Gray-Cooper, . . they were merry and vivacious. Yes, it was children and the attendant responsibility that took the pep out of one.

Mrs. Ramsey introduced Mrs. Johnson Peabody-Mills and the lecture was on. But to Nell Cutter, sitting there and listening to it for a second time, it seemed to have lost its flavor. It was no longer a sparkling, humorous, decisive thing. The words seemed far off and meaningless.

The speaker made the same sprightly refer-

ences to the older generation and its haphazard methods. She spoke of the dignity of labor, and ridiculed people who failed to give their children a few light tasks to perform. She wittily traced the thoughts of a small child when attacked by a giant parent with a switch. She spoke pathetically of keeping down a child's originality and initiative by constant watchfulness over him. She referred often and glibly to the theory of making the punishment fit the crime. Wearily Nell Cutter wondered just what punishment fit that uncut grass.

At the conclusion the speaker asked lightly, pleasantly, whether any one had anything to add. Her words welcomed further remarks, but her tone expressed finality. It was as though it conveyed the idea that there *was* nothing more to say.

Nell glanced around the room at the impassive faces and it was then that she noticed Gramma. Gramma was pale, and she was getting up. She must be sick from the heat. Nell started to rise, too. Then she sat down suddenly, weakly. Gramma was addressing the

speaker; Gramma, who had never belonged to any organization but her church, who had said apologetically just before they started to the club, "Nell, just what *is* psychology?"

And now she was speaking: "Will you let an old woman who has never done anything for the advancement of the world, who has just kept house and had eight babies, say a word or two?"

Mrs. Johnson Peabody-Mills was most gracious. She raised her aristocratic-looking eyebrows questioningly and smiled. If her smile was rather too saccharine in quality, simple-hearted Gramma was unmindful of it.

"Not for the world would I want you to feel I'm being discourteous to you about your views," Gramma was saying. "But somehow, sitting here, I felt like I must explain a little to you about us older mothers. If it was just for myself I'd let it pass. But the others who ain't here, someway they seemed to be whispering to me to talk for them, urging me to get up and sort of take their parts before you younger women, who have had so many more

advantages." She was still pale and her lips were trembling a little from the embarrassment of the unusual thing she was doing. But she went bravely on:

"Now, I don't want to stand here and find fault with the times. I've seen a boy of mine, who was fast losing blood from an accidental gunshot wound, put into a lumber wagon to be hauled to town because there were no autos. I've suffered the pains of childbirth all alone in the house with three other babies, while my husband was racing through the storm for help because there were no telephones. I've buried two little girls in one grave—dead with diphtheria—because the doctors had never heard of antitoxin. So I'd be ashamed to say anything against progress."

Gramma paused a moment and, perhaps sensing a sympathy among her listeners, went on more easily. "I've been a pioneer twice. When I was ten we left our old home and journeyed West with oxen and teams. There are events in that trip that stand out clearer than recent happenings. I have only to smell

the pungent odor of burning spruce and hemlock, and it calls up the vision of all of us children playing around the wagons, the teams munching the grass in an open space near by, the supper cooking over the open fire against the dark pines of the woods and the sun going down in a glimmer of gold."

Every one was listening attentively. There was something majestic about the picture Gramma was drawing.

"Then, when I was in my twenties," she went on, "and the mother of two babies, we moved on again to the West. I've gathered my babies up to me and prayed that we'd get through the night without the Indians coming. I've lived in a sod house and shared the last of our family supplies with rough strangers. I've seen the grasshoppers take all our crops and a tornado lay every building low. I've seen the raw prairie with its long wild grass turn to mellow farm land and towns and cities. I've seen saplings grow to giant trees, and little boys to manhood."

"How could Gramma do it?" thought Nell.

Why, it sounded dignified, regal—like the Psalms. Nell had a swift vision of Ed's mother going quietly to her room every day to read a Book. Gramma had, indeed, associated with good literature.

"With all this for the setting of our home life," the elderly woman continued, "we bore and brought up our children. We had our children work, not because we had theories that a little work is good for them, but because we had to eat to live, and it was absolute and sometimes cruel necessity that made every child have tasks to perform. For punishment, we couldn't keep their spending money from them; for, you see, none of us had any. We couldn't deny them much in the way of candy and sweets, for Christmas and Fourth of July were about the only times we had those things. The children worked hard and studied hard and played hard when there was time left over. And when they disobeyed they were punished. Someway, I never looked upon punishment as breaking the self-reliance of a child. I never dreamed that it was contrary to the best inter-

est of the child mind. I thought of it as their first lesson in law and order and justice."

Gramma looked appealingly at the speaker . . . humbly . . . as though seeking forgiveness for the things she had done, as though asking mercy for the things she had left undone.

The speaker filled the gap graciously, as one who was trained in the ways of diplomacy. "And your children?" She might have been sincere and she might have been merely covering the slight embarrassment of the moment with a perfunctory question. "Your children . . . have they . . . have they turned out well?"

Color had come back now to Gramma's face. The loose skin was covered with a flush that concentrated itself in two vivid pink spots on her wrinkled old cheeks.

"That's a natural question," she answered quickly, "and a fair one. Yes." Into her brown eyes, windows of a temple in which the altar fires would soon die down to embers, there came a humorous ripple, the same slow drollness, thought Nell, which was so

characteristic of Ed. "Yes," she nodded. "I can say honestly that they're real good boys. Eddie, now, he's a lawyer." Unconsciously she was using the old childish names as she began the roll. "Sammie's on the old home place, and has the best equipped farm for miles around. Joey's pastor of one of the largest churches in Minneapolis. Johnnie's on the faculty of the state university. He's studied at Oxford and written some textbooks. Davy's on the staff of one of the Chicago hospitals. He specializes in abdominal surgery. And Bobbie, the rascaliest one of all, Bobbie's the new governor of the state where he was paddled."

Involuntarily every one broke into applause, quick, staccato applause and high bubbling laughter. It seemed to frighten Gramma. She looked around like a scared child and slipped into her seat behind fat Mrs. Farnham.

There were a few more perfunctory remarks, and the meeting adjourned. Nell edged her way to Gramma to whisper "Good for you!" And immediately, in the vague fear

that Mrs. Peabody-Mills would notice a change in her own manner, she went to her and urged her to come and see her before leaving town. Then, without waiting for the punch and wafers, she slipped out and walked hurriedly home.

Head high and mind clear, she walked determinedly. In fact, she went as one called to the foreign field. As she went up the walk toward the house she saw the boys lolling under an apple tree. They were still dirty, tangled of hair, and engaged in that most pernicious, mischief-engendering occupation of boyhood—doing nothing. As she went to her bedroom and got out of her pretty foulard dress into a gingham, she could still hear their aimless pushings and slappings and arguments.

Out again to the yard she walked. "Get your cobs in and your grass cut, boys," she said cheerfully, emphatically.

"No," Craig said. "I don't wantta. Nick's gotta. 'Taint my business!"

"Well, I guess, you crazy-Ike—"

"Boys," said their mother firmly. "Will

you start this minute for your cobs and grass?"

"No. I don't wantta . . . Nick's the one."

"No sir-ee, I ain't. Craig's—"

With the same hands that had rocked their cradle and ruled their baby world, Nell Cutter took her two boys by the hindmost seams of their collars. They tried to shake away, but by a strategic move as carefully planned as one of General Foch's, she clutched them tightly. Straight to the cob house she marched them. There are people who dislike to hear ghastly details. There are censors who cut out gruesome particulars. These people of delicate sensibilities this account is going to offend.

By the simple process of slipping down the civilized garments which covered nature in her primitive garb, this mother began the lurid proceedings. Mrs. Peabody-Mills would have contended that it humiliated the boys' embryonic manhood. Maybe so. Nell Cutter did not stop to debate the psychological effect on futurity. For, friction being the resistance to motion caused by the clashing of two bodies one against the other, this educated, well-read

club-woman mother, with the flat of her good right hand, made friction.

Mrs. Peabody-Mills had said spankings only made children mad. It merely roused their anger. Right she was. The boys were mad. They were madder than hatters and wet hens combined. They ran around and bumped their heads and fought and kicked and said saucy things. And ever and anon as they did so, their mother casually manufactured a little more friction. Physically she was hot. Mentally she was cool as a cucumber. And as she worked she soliloquized: "I'm not a cruel monster. I'm a sensible mother. I'm not angry. But I'm in earnest. And I'm not lazy. I'm the spirit of Eve and Sarah and Rebecca. I'm Columbus' mother and John Wesley's. I'm a Pilgrim mother and Nancy Hanks and Gramma Cutter. I'm Law and Order and Justice."

At the conclusion of the program Nick had his arms around his mother, was clinging tightly to her and crying humble tears. Craig was off in one corner sobbing quietly. Almost

the mother was sobbing, too. But not all the brave mothers lived in Sparta.

"Now," she said, "get in your cobs, then cut your grass, and then clean up good and thoroughly."

They ran for the cob basket. They gathered cobs as though a flood were coming to cut off the entire supply. They fed and watered the chickens. They cut grass, great heaping basketsful. Nay, more, they painstakingly swept the walks where they had spilled a few blades.

"Anything more you want, Mama?" they inquired solicitously. Uriah Heep was not more humble. They entered the bathroom dirty and unkempt. They came out scrubbed and combed, with clean waists and trousers.

While they had been performing their ablutions, Nell announced to her daughter, "Josephine, set your table. And I might as well tell you that if you argue about it, as big as you are, I'll paddle you, too."

Supper was a pleasant meal. The children were unargumentative and they were carefully polite.

After supper the entire family gathered on the porch. It was here that Mrs. Ramsey and Mrs. Peabody-Mills found them. Mrs. Mills talked pleasantly and animatedly. She referred to the darling grandmother and her quaint little speech.

"And your own lovely family," she indicated. "Your children are charming. What methods are you employing?"

Nell looked at the boys, playing catch now in the side yard, playing noisily but without dissension. In her mind's eye she could see dull red patches on their posteriors, anatomically speaking. She knew that by means of the Bertillon system a detective would be able to match those spots with the contour of her own right hand.

Then, carefully avoiding Ed's eye, which she sensed would be twinkling, she answered blithely, "I make it a point to choose the best from the various systems, so I rather expect it would be called an eclectic method."

CHAPTER III

THE WHITE ELEPHANT SALE

IN addition to the enterprising act of bringing Mrs. Peabody-Mills to lecture, there were other reforms let loose upon a helpless community by the newly arrived Mrs. Archibald Ramsey when she and her husband were fairly settled in Meadows.

To Mrs. Ramsey, life was real and life was earnest. But, like many another reformer, she lacked a sense of humor; that third eye which sees whimsy behind the reality, and fun along with the earnestness.

Mrs. Ramsey had no children; and she had reduced housework to an almost negligible quantity. Therefore she had ample time and strength left for reforming other women's methods. Her approach gave one the sensation of seeing a funnel-shaped cloud coming one's way.

"The amount of things she accomplishes is marvelous," Nell Cutter confided to Ed. "She makes me ashamed."

"She makes me *tired,*" was Ed's masculine answer. "She ought to have been foreman of a boiler factory or Secretary of the Navy. She'd be about as restful to come home to as a whirling dervish."

Mrs. Ramsey had not been in town four weeks before she was elected president of the Woman's Club. What is more, she virtually asked for the job. It had been the custom in Meadows to sit modestly back when nominated and if elected decline to serve until coaxed into submission. But Mrs. Ramsey was frankness itself.

"I'd like to have you consider me a candidate for the presidency," she stated quite definitely. "I know so thoroughly the things that would be most helpful to the club." She was unanimously elected.

It was soon after this that Nell Cutter called upon the lady, but she was not at home. Then, as the hospitable custom is in small towns, she

further welcomed the Ramseys to Meadows by inviting them to dinner. All day long she cooked and baked, while Opal cleaned and dusted. At six o'clock—the dinner hour having been changed from high noon out of deference to the newcomers—the family and their guests sat down to what the Meadows *Mirror* would call "a bounteous repast."

Two weeks later the Ramseys entertained Ed and Nell Cutter. On the day of the dinner Josephine remarked anxiously to her mother, "Are you sure you've got the day right, Mama? Mrs. Ramsey don't *act* like she was having company. She was working in her flower garden all this morning."

Craig and Nick gave forth the added information in the afternoon that they "seen her all dolled up, calling on folks." Nell Cutter held her thoughts to herself. She felt she was about to prove that Mrs. Ramsey was a very poor housekeeper.

She was mistaken. The house was immaculate and in good taste. The living room contained some choice books, a piano, a davenport,

two small Oriental rugs, an almost bare library table, and four chairs. There was one picture —a good one—on the wall. There were no cushions, no bric-à-brac, no accumulation of magazines, no photographs of friends. The other rooms rivaled this in plainness and cleanliness.

The dinner was served without linen. The napkins were of soft paper. The china was reflected in the dark-polished wood of the table. There were few dishes. Besides bread and butter there were two vegetables, a cheese dish, a plain salad and fruit. It was enough to sustain life but the Meadows *Mirror* in its wildest prevarication could not have called it "a bounteous repast."

Mrs. Ramsey made no apology for the simple layout. On the contrary she called attention to the fact that they were partaking of balanced rations—so many proteins—so many carbohydrates—! It was a perfect meal. The hostess herself said so.

After dinner, at Mrs. Ramsey's own pleasant suggestion, each one carried his things to

the kitchen. Nell smiled to herself to see Ed ambling out obediently. Mrs. Ramsey put the few dishes in an immaculate sink and covered them with water. "I'll wash them in the morning," she explained. Her dinner work was temporarily done.

While the men smoked the two women talked. "I'm enchanted," Nell told her hostess. "You make your work so easy."

"It's the trouble with you women here in Meadows," Mrs. Ramsey rejoiced at her opportunity to do missionary work. "You cook too big a variety. You eat too much. If you balanced your rations properly you could get along with half the amount. And you have too many things in your homes. You make a fetish of housework. You bow down to idols . . . the things that you have had a long time and that clutter up your homes. What you want to do is to eliminate everything that is unessential to actual living. In this age of progress there is no room for sentiment over the past."

Nell Cutter was nothing if not fair. "You're

right—absolutely. When I think of the things I dust—!" Yes, she had gone to scoff and remained to pray.

She went home enthusiastic. "Ed, just think of the tablecloths I wash every week—and the napkins—and the stuff I cook . . . and the things I hoard that we don't really *need*—! We can't fix over the whole house but I'm going to do one room just like hers—the dining room. Just *nothing* in it but shining, polished table and chairs."

"Her table and chairs were all right," Ed admitted, "but she wouldn't have made me sore if she'd sped up a little on the eats."

In the week that followed Nell Cutter rode on a wave of reform. She went on a perfect rampage of getting unessentials out of her house. Over and over, to bolster up her courage, she repeated to herself that in this age of progress there was no room for sentiment over the past. It was as though she broke the very vessel in which the waters of tender emotion had been contained and drained it dry. Ruthlessly she burned Ed's wedding vest. Grimly

she put ribbon-bound letters on the funeral pyre. Though it was like taking raw quinine she added Josephine's first little bootees, a yellowed bonnet of Craig's, the little cat without a tail that Nicky had carried under his arm in his toddling days, and the baby's broken rattle. "It takes truck like that to clutter up a house," she explained hard-heartedly to Ed.

She made over the dining room. When she had finished, it was a brave imitation of Mrs. Ramsey's, bare and clean. She cut down on food. "Will you have a slice of proteids? Or a spoonful of carbohydrates?" began to be Ed's idea of a huge joke.

But Nell was in earnest. "Joke, if you want to," she would say, "but it's really a very serious matter." She worked just as hard as she had done before but prepared far less to eat. "It takes so long to look it all up," she explained. "But I'm willing to do it for the children's health."

"Health! Ho! Ho!" Craig was scorn personified. "I weigh seven pounds more than your old chart says a nine-year-old needs to."

"I'm bigger'n Heinie Peterson right now and he's two years older'n me." Nick, too resented the implication.

"Maybe you're. . ." their mother searched for the word, "maybe you're too flabby."

They almost screeched at her in the disgust of their feelings. "Well, I guess not . . . you ought to see me take down Red Horner. . . ."

"Ya . . . I got muscles, I have . . . I got better muscles. . . ." They sputtered incoherently in their superlative contempt.

In the midst of this orgy of house and health reform Mrs. Ramsey called a special meeting of the Woman's Club to discuss plans which she wished to lay before them. Mrs. Ramsey, herself, stopped for Nell on the way to the meeting. The latter was in her bedroom putting the finishing touches to her toilet when Mrs. Ramsey came into the room and sat down. It was an unusual thing to do but there were no longer any sacred places in Meadows. Mrs. Ramsey's efficient, practical, sanitary nose poked into them all.

Nell's bedroom contained only essentials.

She called Mrs. Ramsey's attention to her achievement. There stood the big bed, the baby's crib, two chairs, a dresser containing her own things and a high bureau for Ed's.

"It's very good," the visitor acknowledged. "But . . ." her eagle eye lighted on three pictures on the wall and she smiled indulgently, "you could dispense with those. How many times do you dust them?"

"Oh, ever so many," Nell acknowledged.

One picture was Nell's old home, another of Josephine as a baby and the other a print of Stevenson's "Morning Prayer," embellished with water colors.

"How people will hang on to their possessions," Mrs. Ramsey sighed tolerantly. "Now take that picture of Josephine. You certainly don't need it when you have the real girl to look at every day." Swiftly the thought passed through Nell's mind that if Mrs. Ramsey had children she would understand that the dimpled baby on the wall was no more the tall, lanky Josephine of to-day than though she had been another child.

"And your old home . . . can you see it in your mind?"

Nell's face lighted with memory. "Oh, as though I am really there . . . the elms in the yard . . . the rose bushes . . . mother on the steps! . . ."

"Then you can dispense with the picture," was the definite comment. "And that prayer of Stevenson's. I'll wager you have unconsciously committed it."

"I could say it backwards."

"Then you don't need it up there getting dusty and taking time from the important things of life."

As an answer that she was worsted, Nell laughingly took the miscreants from their hooks and laid them in the bottom of her dresser drawer.

"You're coming on," Mrs. Ramsey commended. "How you old-fashioned women do dig your graves with your brooms and your dust cloths."

Together they went to the meeting, the efficient one and her disciple. With all her char-

acteristic energy, as though the thermometer were not registering ninety-eight, Mrs. Ramsey presented to the ladies a plan for raising money. They were to give a bazaar . . . a community affair . . . in the park. There were to be booths, a ball game, sports. She had the details all arranged. The people were to eat their noon meal there. There would be a band concert, a program, a movie show, an auction sale.

To Nell Cutter, tired after her morning's work, fanning herself with her hat, the whole thing seemed too stupendous to attempt in the hot weather. But not to Mrs. Ramsey. She glowed with the high motive of her mission. She was like an engine getting up steam. Almost they could hear the choo-choo-choo of the exhaust.

The auction sale was the cap sheaf of her plan. It was to be a white elephant sale . . . all the things for which they had no immediate use were to be brought to the park and sold from a booth.

Nell timidly ventured a question. "But why

palm off on some one else all these unessentials and thereby clutter up other homes?"

Mrs. Ramsey was ready. "What is superfluous in your home might be essential for some one else."

The money was all to go toward a rest room. Mrs. Ramsey stated it as definitely and firmly as though it had been voted upon. Then she appointed committees. She cast diplomacy to the winds. She placed Minnie Raymond and little Mrs. Marks in the fancywork booth although they had not spoken to each other for some time. She ignored Charlotte Gray-Cooper who had directed the community music for years and placed Mrs. Parkham as chairman. She asked a retired banker to see that the booths were built and the town carpenter to make a short speech. Everything was topsy-turvy. Alice had gone to Blunderland. And the result was that the bazaar was a success. When fools rush in there is no halfway result. They either spill the beans or accomplish more than the angels who fear to tread.

In the days preceding the bazaar Nell went over the house very carefully to prune off a few more nonessentials. She found that she could put Ed's things in part of her own dresser drawers and sell the old bureau, although she had to ask Gramma's consent first, for it had been her property in the past. Then she took from her dresser Stevenson's "Prayer" and added it to the donations. Some wooden soldiers that tumbled on her head every time she opened a closet door went next. Then there were a few seldom-used dishes, a half-worn rug, Ed's old steamer trunk, shabby and too disgraceful looking for any potential trip, and an old Panama hat of his. As she sent the things down to the park in a dray she looked about the house with satisfaction. The whole place was as clean as a hound's tooth and free from cluttering souvenirs of the past.

The morning of the bazaar the Cutter household was early astir. Craig and Nick washed themselves almost thoroughly without being prodded to it. But when it came to choosing wearing apparel for the festive occasion their

mother struck a wall of ideas. No Sunday suits for them, no sir, overalls was good enough for an old bazaar. They guessed most folks had seen overalls before in their lives. The irresistible force had met the immovable object. Their mother won by the scurvy trick of threatening to withhold the fifty cents each that they were to have for spending money. It was ever thus . . . the man with the money holding the destinies of the poor in the hollow of his hand. Gramma and Opal were to take care of the baby so Nell could work in her booth all day. Gramma was to go down early and come back in time to let Opal go.

Nell was chairman of the pie booth. She cut pie until she began to hate the sight of it. She seemed to live on an island that stood in a sea of pie. The waves of the ocean were lemon, custard, pumpkin, apple, raisin, cream, peach, and raspberry. She wondered how people could eat it. Cast iron . . . some folks' stomachs!

As has been stated the affair was a success. To be sure there were a few discrepancies. A

trained ear might have detected a limitation in the repertoire of the band, which consisted of three selections, no one could hear what the perspiring carpenter was saying, and an old shepherd dog from the country got into the hot wienie booth during the temporary absence of the saleslady and was later evicted with seven feet of the booth's commodity dragging behind him. But looked at broadly, a good time was had by all and the local physicians profited greatly.

In the late afternoon, while the ball game was in progress, and all the masculine contingent (which means all the members of the Ancient Order of Pie-Eaters) had gone to it, Nell left her booth and walked to the white elephant department, where lay the wreckage of a hundred homes. Hanging on the back of the booth was her water-colored "Prayer." It gave her a queer feeling to see it there. Aunt Amy had painted it for her long ago. And Aunt Amy was dead. It seemed a horrible thing to give it away. Her eyes had always fallen upon it the first thing in the morning.

It had seemed to greet her with cheer and philosophy:

The day returns and brings us the petty round of irritating concerns and duties. . . .

Just before noon, that high-water mark of the day's work, when she had slipped into her room to brush her hair and put on a clean apron, it had smiled encouraging at her:

Help us to perform them with laughter and kind faces. . . .

Arising from a hastily snatched five minutes of rest in the early afternoon, it had helped her with:

Give us to go blithly on our business all this day. . . .

At night, tired to the depths, it had dropped the benediction of its:

. . . Bring us to our resting beds weary and content and undishonored. . . .

It had been very helpful to her. But it was not practical. Neither was it sanitary. It did not add materially to one's efficiency.

At supper time Nell collected the many packages of eatables which she had purchased from the various booths and started home. The park had a moist, sticky look like a tramp with an unwashed face. She looked around for Ed but did not see him, so she trudged wearily home. It had been a tiresome, hot job. She wondered if the commotion had been worth while. If each family had subscribed ten dollars to the fund they could have dispensed with the whole bazaar. But then they would have missed the doubtful pleasure of eating each other's pie. Some good at least had come out of it . . . that white elephant sale. As she walked along she told herself that her own home was more free from accumulated stuff than it had been for years. It gave her the one light-hearted moment of the day.

A block from home Josephine came running to meet her. She was smiling and beginning to talk when afar off. "Look, mama, it's

Peggy . . . my old Peggy dressed up so cute you'd never know her. And only fifty cents. Mrs. Horner dressed her. Look, a scarlet cape and tam to match." Josephine was radiant.

"Why, Josephine, did you spend your money for your own old doll?"

"Well, I'd already bought an ice-cream cone . . . and then I saw Peggy. And Mrs. Horner . . . she said for me to take her for forty-five cents if that was all I had. She said she guessed I was *in*titled to her after I'd donated her." She turned and ran her arm through her mother's. "And Craig he got a dandy bargain, too . . . an engine . . . his own old engine and train. It was broke you know . . . the thing you wind, but Mr. Horner fixed it and it's as good as new and he's got it in the back porch now all set up and you'd never know it had been busted."

"Of all things! Your own old toys!" Nell was half amused and half exasperated.

At home, she cuddled the baby a few minutes and then went into the bedroom to change

her dress. From the west window she could see Pete Burrows in his dray stopping and then backing up. She called to Gramma: "Go to the door, will you, Gramma? Tell Pete he's made a mistake."

Gramma came to the bedroom and stood in the doorway. There were two pink spots on her cheeks and she acted nervous. "No, there's no mistake, Nellie. I hope you won't feel cross with me. It's the bureau . . . my old walnut bureau. I bought it myself. I can have it in my bedroom. There's room if I push the bed a little to the north. I won't ask you to put it back in yours. I never let on when you asked me about selling it . . . but I knew I was going down early and buy it myself. I couldn't bear to think of anybody else having it. I remember the spring I got it. I was so proud of it. We had had such a hard winter and I raised some pigs . . . four little pigs that lost their mother. I had to get up in the night to feed them warm milk . . . like babies. I couldn't go to town. It was the spring before Davy was born and Father

took the pigs in to sell. I thought he was going to pay a lumber bill with them, but when he came back he had the bureau in the wagon. I can see him yet, driving up to the door, with the kind of quiet smile he had when he knew he was surprising me; and he said, joking-like, 'Mother, they give you a drawer for every pig.' "

Gramma looked up at her daughter-in-law beseechingly. "I hope you don't mind, Nellie?"

"Oh, that's all right, Gramma. My sakes! You ought to have told me how you felt about it."

Her dress changed, Nell went to the kitchen to get the supper. It was a hodge-podge affair, cooked and baked by as many different women as there were dishes. She and Josephine chattered about it as they put it on: "Mrs. Horner does have the best luck with her Lady Baltimore cake," or, "I'd know Mrs. Brisbane's salad if I saw it in China . . . the way she always fixes the pimentos over the top."

Supper was ready, but neither Ed nor Nick was there. The others waited until it was getting almost dusk. It was then that Ed drove up to the garage. Nell, standing by the kitchen window, saw him getting out slowly, as though he had been cramped. He lifted something from the car, carefully and cautiously. He walked from the garage to the cob house lightly, warily. One would have said he was trying to make the trip without being heard.

Like a beagle hound, or a plain clothes man, Mrs. Edward Everett Cutter stepped quietly out of the back door. Straight to the cob house she tiptoed. At the door she met her husband coming out empty handed, apparently attempting to make his exit in stealth.

"Ed Cutter, what are you putting in there?"

"My trunk!" He glared at her. "My old trunk, that I bought when I was a green kid just off the farm and took to college with me. The fellows used to sit on it in my room—Fielding and Joe Miller and old Jim Robertson. Billie Fielding's initials are cut in it.

Gosh! When I saw the old thing standing down there, with all that secondhand stuff, I felt as though I'd been kicking an old friend out. I'm not sentimental about keepsakes, but I'll be darned if I'll ever again let that old Hohenzollern of a Ramsey woman dictate to me what of my own possessions I'll keep and what I can't.

Nell Cutter stood there on the back walk, saying nothing, while Ed walked back to the car, to put it in the garage. Before he got in he made a quick movement as though to tuck something out of sight. Surreptitiously, dexterously, he did it. But wives have eyes in the back of their heads.

"And what's *that?*" his own asked with infinite sarcasm.

"That?" Ed's fine air of bravado had vanished. "That?" he repeated, apparently sparring for time. He was only a sheepish little boy now, facing an irate mother. "Oh, *that!*" he spoke jauntily, as though surprised at seeing the package. "Why, that's my old Panama. I just happened to buy it back

. . . thought I could wear it in the garden . . . thought I might want it to go fishing . . . it always felt good on my head . . . I thought. . . ."

She turned and left him mumbling apologetic reasons.

In the dining room Nell gathered her flock up to supper.

"Where's Nicky?" she was asking, when, like the cue at a play, the front door burst open and Nicky blew in. He began yelling before he had reached the rest of the family:

"I'll *say* this is a *fine* thing somebody did. Who give 'em my old box o' soldiers, I'd like to know? I never told nobody they could give my soldiers away. They had 'em marked twenty-five cents, 'n' I only had nineteen left, but they let me bring 'em. Somebody's got to give me the rest. I said I'd come right back. . . . It's six cents. I figgered it out. I gotta have six cents from somebody—gimme six cents!"

"Oh, for goodness' sakes, you folks make me sick!" Nell exploded. "No wonder we've

got a house full of stuff! No wonder I dig and dig all day long! You're the most sentimental creatures I ever heard of—sloppy and sentimental over a lot of old *junk!*"

Ed was slipping six cents to his belligerent son. "Aw, let the kid have his old soldiers!"

Nell was tired and she showed it: "Children, you're the *noisiest,* on this bare table. Believe me, I'm going back to tablecloths. It sounds like a telegraph office in here." And then, as she began passing the picnic-supper dishes, she added, "Good land! I forgot all about balancing these rations."

"Don't mind *me!*" Ed remarked, elaborately cheerful. "I'd rather have this kind of a meal any day than a broiled vitamine."

When the family had settled down for the night, Nell busied herself until she saw that they were all asleep. She even tested Ed's quiescent condition by calling his name softly. When he did not answer she tiptoed to the bed, reached under it and drew forth a package. Cautiously she undid it, took out a flat object and hung it on the wall. Like the face

of an old and loved friend it smiled back at her:

The day returns. . . .

Like the touch of a vanished hand it soothed her as she began undressing:

. . . let cheerfulness abound with industry. . . .

With a sense of peace surrounding her like an aura, she slipped into bed. How good it was that the family were all together . . . all under the home roof . . . all well . . . all

weary and content and undishonored.

She felt herself slipping into a cloud-bed that would soon turn to dreams. The low night light shone with a faint ray on the familiar blue and gold of the prayer. The words came back like the benediction of the dying day:

. . . and grant us in the end the gift of sleep.

"You can't tell me!" she thought drowsily. "There are other things in the world besides pep and sanitation and balanced rations and efficiency."

All the next morning Nell stood at the telephone and talked with town and country women. Her revolt was complete. In the afternoon when the Woman's Club met to report, she had her mind made up. Mrs. Ramsey called the meeting to order, and reported four hundred and thirty-nine dollars and sixteen cents cleared from the bazaar.

Then she proceeded, energetically, efficiently, to make arrangements for the rest room. Nell's throat was dry and she was inwardly shaking at her temerity. The time had come.

"Madam President!" Nell plunged in boldly. "I've talked with all the members of the club, and with many others, and I find that they really do not care for the rest room. Many said that they felt we could easily continue using the alcove in Nelson's store. Some of those out in the country told me that they

had no time to rest when they did come to town. I move, therefore, as a result of this investigation, that the sum of money be turned over to the library for new books and magazines, from which the entire community will receive benefit."

It was seconded, remarked upon, and carried. Nell glanced from the corner of her eye at Mrs. Ramsey. That lady would be vexed, of course, so much so that they might even lose her efficient leadership. But Nell Cutter did not yet know her Mrs. Ramsey.

"Now," said that lady briskly, cheerfully, firmly, "I shall be very glad to make out the list of new books and magazines. I know so thoroughly the very ones that you ought to have."

CHAPTER IV

THE FAMILY TAKES A VACATION

WHEN the July bazaar had become a thing of the past, the Cutter family —and all of Meadows for that matter—seemed to settle down into a midsummer lethargy.

The statement is often made that small-town folks get to slipping along in ruts. Quite true! So do city folks and country folks, rich people and poor ones, fishermen and congressmen. Probably the angels in heaven do and the demons down under the sea.

Nell often complained about it to her husband. "Ed," she would say, "don't you think life gets awfully monotonous sometimes?" I have spells when I just want to fly—get off somewhere away from everybody in this town. Think of it! To wash on Monday and iron on Tuesday and clean on Wednesday—and

always the youngsters and three meals! Isn't it maddening?"

Ed's diagnosis was simplicity itself: "You need a vacation."

"You might as well say, 'You need a million dollars,'" was her acrid retort.

Pending the time that tickets to Mars go on sale there are many fortunate people who continue to set blithely off for Hongkong or the Riviera, when they feel this physical and mental wanderlust. Others, scarcely less free, play leisurely about our own country. But many families, like the Cutters, encumbered with four children, a grandmother, a dog, fifty-two chickens, and a more or less uncertain number of guinea pigs, stay on indefinitely at home. Only their spirits, those travelers which no mere town lots can confine, sail the high seas.

Since the children came, the wildest adventure of the Cutter family had consisted in camping for ten days each summer at Wood Lake and attending that great American institution known as Chautauqua. Chautauqua is

to the small-town folks of the Mid-West what grand opera is to the New Yorker, what the cherry-blossom festival is to the Japanese, or the Passion Play to the peasant of Oberammergau. Those who have not been present at its informal sessions have never known the epitome of village culture. The big tent with lifted sides, the midsummer waves of heat which literally beat against it, the long rows of pine seats filled with listeners, constitute the setting for the lecturers, dramatists, actors, readers, and musicians who come from afar with messages.

To all intents and purposes, Nell had always enjoyed these annual outings: the novelty of living in a netting-screened tent, the general air of sociability among the campers, and, above all, the music and lectures. But, now, for some unknown reason, as the time for the annual migration drew near, she felt a distaste for it. "Ed," she complained, "I don't care two whoops about going. I'm tired of it; the same old thing—rushing around looking like a model citizen and listening to a lot of moral

uplift. And think of the people who camp near us! Who do we see every summer?"

"If you mean 'Whom do we see?' I can truthfully and conscientiously answer that we see practically the same ones we do in Meadows."

It was quite true. The Raymonds, the Horners, the whole neighborhood picked up, formed a chattering cavalcade to Wood Lake, and camped with extreme friendliness around each other, so that the colony became a transplanted Meadows.

"If I didn't know what was always going to happen!" Nell's complaint continued. "But I can visualize the whole thing before we start: The tent floor will be faced the wrong way, and it'll rain half the time, and the youngsters'll have a parade the last night. I've made Craig into an Indian and Nicky into a negro and Josephine into a Puritan girl every summer and— Oh, I don't know; the whole thing seems so sort of mediocre and common and small townish."

"Well, it may not be like doing Italy," Ed

was cheerfully argumentative; "but I've always had a notion it was a fine thing for the kids."

"I suppose so; but I'm tired of continually doing what's best for somebody else. I'd like for once to do something *I* want to. *I* don't want to go where there's more fresh air. Good land, Ed, that's the biggest commodity in Meadows! *I* don't want to hear the lovely birds sing. I want to hear Galli-Curci. *I* don't want to sit on a soft mossy bank. I want to sit on a hard theater seat. I want to go to matinées and movies and crowded tea rooms, and elbow my way through stuffy lobbies. Meadows is my home, but I hate to think of being buried here without seeing a city again."

"Where would you like to go?" Ed Cutter was a patient husband.

"Oh, Ed, I want to visit Sylvia McManus. She says in her letter that she will never come here again, and loll around in a hammock, and let me fry chicken for her, until I make her a good visit. It would be the grandest vacation I could think of." Then suddenly, gen-

erously, she added, "What would *you* do if you had your choice?"

"Go fishing." Ed was definiteness itself. "Go up to Okawana Lake next week with Doc Rhodes and old Dad Miller. Lock the office door. Just do nothing but fish for ten days. Sleep out—and fry our catch—and live close to nature."

Then a most astounding thing happened: Ed and Nell Cutter, one of the most protecting and habitually-on-the-job set of parents in Meadows, after endless discussions, decided to abandon their offspring and the timeworn Chautauqua, and do those other two very exciting things. But this was not all of the great adventure. The children were allowed to name their choice of vacations, too, and not one was found to be unreasonable or out of the question. Josephine was in raptures when she realized that she could really go back with the Mellons, former neighbors, to spend ten days with them at Dale City. Craig's and Nick's double verdict was to enjoy the time at Uncle Sammie's and Aunt Emma's farm

home. "I never *was* there enough," Craig announced.

There still remained the baby and Gramma. But their desires were simple. The very old and very young ask for only a few comforts: shelter, food, sleep, peace. The baby's decision was necessarily made for him. Opal and Stena, her mother, were to take him home. It was the one point on which Nell feared she would weaken; but Stena and Opal both protested that they would never let him out of their sight.

Gramma brought forth her own naïve wish: "I'd like to just stay on here when you all leave, and to have an old friend of mine, Lucy Turner, come to see me. She's an old lady now, and I haven't seen her for years, but I know just how she'll be. I can think of nothing more enjoyable than the sight of her dear, pleasant face. We were all young together in the pioneer days, and many are the good times we've had. I'd like to try my hand at baking again—some of the old dishes: cornbread, and potatoes in the ashes, and stewed chicken with

dumplings—and then just enjoy myself talking with her."

So it came about that for once in his life each member of the family was to have his dearest wish fulfilled. The week of preparation was pregnant with happiness. The joy of anticipation seemed a definite thing in the house, like a flesh-and-blood person who had taken a room there. All through the busy days Nell went about with a song in her heart. Something that had not known liberty, something hitherto caged within her, was to be set free for a time. And how supremely happy she would be, knowing that the others were all having their good times: Ed at his fishing, Josephine in the quiet formality of the Mellon home, the boys reveling in the space and freedom of the farm, Gramma living over the delightful days of her past, and the baby well cared for. The stage, then, was all set for the day of perfect pleasure.

Josephine went first, her clothes carefully packed in the second-best grip, rapturous over a vanity case which she had hitherto been de-

nied. As she was getting into the car, she put her exuberant feelings into words: "It don't seem that heaven could have anything nicer than this trip."

Disreputable looking in their tramp togs, Ed and the other Walton disciples left next with Craig and Nick, whom they were to leave at Uncle Sammie's on their way to the happy fishing grounds. Ed was whistling and boyish-acting. Craig declared he wished the visit could last forever. Nick added that the old homely town never looked so dinky.

Then Opal took the baby home. "I'll 'phone a little later to see how he is," Nell told her. "If he's crying, I'll stay over." But when she telephoned it was to hear Stena say, "He's havin' the time of his life. *He* don't want no mama. Effie's got him in the little wagon, and Heinie and Chris is his horses. He's hollerin' at 'em like a little roughneck." Nell hung up the receiver with happy moisture in her eyes. How beautifully everything was working out!

When Nell left the house, Gramma was deep

in the intricacies of an old-fashioned sour-cream cake, her eyes bright with anticipation. Nothing was wanting, thought Nell, as she went to the station. She, who had constantly served others, could, for once in her life, go legitimately forth and seek Pleasure, that elusive and lovely lady who is so much more charming than her plain and sedate comrade, Service.

On the train she settled down luxuriously. Her sense of freedom from petty, irksome cares was a garment which wrapped her, warmed her. For ten days, without responsibilities, she could revel in the world of music and letters and art, the world she had left behind when she married a country lawyer and settled down in Meadows. She dwelt on the meeting again with Sylvia McManus, her old girlhood friend, who had never married and who was a real figure, now, in the business world. Exactly what income Sylvia was earning Nell did not know, except that it was beyond that of any man in Meadows.

She found Sylvia, as usual, looking wonder-

fully young, with that smart air of knowing how to get about under all circumstances, a little commanding way which was neither arrogant nor bold.

"Sylvia, you're lovely! Tell me—do I look right? I got my things in Dale City."

Sylvia McManus laughed. "You're quite all right."

Nell went into ecstasies over the apartment. "Do you like it?" her hostess asked. "I'm getting tired of it myself. I'm thinking of changing to the New Vandeere." She said it as casually as Nell would have mentioned putting the setting hens in the lower coop.

In the days that followed, Nell discovered other things about her old chum that were as though she lived in another world. Sylvia was a good woman, but she was no longer orthodox. She was eminently respectable, but not circumscribed. By the side of Nell's own village limitations, she was as free as the winds that blow over the Kotzebue Sound. She had all sorts of friends . . . some married men among them. Apparently, she held no sentiment for

them, just a friendship which was both unaffected and cordial. It was a new condition to Nell. And quite natural and pleasant, she decided. She thought of Meadows, where the most audacious mingling among the married set consisted in cutting advertisements in two to match the halves for supper partners. She was ashamed to think how narrow and provincial they were.

During the week, Nell reveled in her new environment like a bather in the surf. She attended theaters, musicales, and an art exhibit, met, among a host of others, an actor of whom she had read, an illustrator whose name was known wherever a magazine went, and a poet whose works she loved.

And then—at the end of the seventh day—there was a crisis in her visit, in her very life itself, no less precipitate because it was merely mental.

The evening was stormy, and the two friends decided to retire early. It was an intense relief to Nell, for she wanted to be alone to think. She went into the dainty guest cham-

ber, quietly closed the door, turned out the lights and sat down by the window. She could hear the low muffled roar of the storm and the equally low muffled roar of traffic, which swirled about the city of big worth-while things. Bravely she faced the torturing idea that had been growing in her mind. It was folly to be dishonest longer with herself. *She had made a mistake in marrying. This* was the life for which she was really meant. Every instinct told her that she fitted in here as though to the station born. *She* had been as clever as Sylvia in college days. She, too, would have made good in the business world of which Sylvia was an integral part. If she had only been strong enough to put Ed out of her life fifteen years before, she, also, would have been prominent in the world of women now, prosperous and free.

"We had equal chances, Sylvia and I," she thought enviously. "Sylvia has progressed, and *I've* deteriorated. She has a keen, penetrating, business-trained mind. And *I* have a currant-jelly, flat-iron, romper-pattern

mind." Suddenly she felt vehemently angry that this was so. Having only one precious life to live, why must she live it in the wrong environment? Everywhere people were in niches in which they did not belong. Square pegs in round holes! Why should she not go to Ed bravely and honestly, and tell him this? Ed was nothing if not fair. He would see it as she did. There would be no disgusting quarrel, not the slightest move toward divorce, just a complete understanding that they should live their separate lives for a time as each saw fit.

With an inherent capacity for organization, she began making plans. Some were faulty, others completely worthless, but at last she felt she could see a solution: They would keep the home just as it was. "Home" was the word she used, not stopping to think that a house from which the soul has fled is nothing but so many square feet of lath and plaster and shingles. Yes, that was the best plan, she thought. Ed and Gramma still living there, with Opal to work for them. Gramma would

rather like being her own boss again. Craig and Nicky could stay at Uncle Sammie's and go to the consolidated school. It wasn't far. Ed could see them often. Why, some people placed their boys in schools abroad, seeing them but once a year. Josephine either could come with her to the city or go to a reliable girls' school. The baby? He was the snag on which the whirling, eddying thoughts of her mind always stuck. She couldn't seem to think of Ed without his baby boy toddling to meet him, winding chubby arms around his leg. "Help!" Ed would always call in mock fright. "He's got me in a trap!" At which the baby would chuckle jubilantly. But, then, the whole thing would take courage and energy to put across. One couldn't expect results in anything without effort. So she would have to bring the baby with her. With an instinctive sense of her capability she knew she would soon be in a position to hire a trained nurse for her child.

Suddenly she was aroused from her wanderings into the Elysian Fields of her dreams by

Sylvia tapping at her door. "Nell, are you awake? Meadows is calling you."

At the telephone there was hideous delay. Nell's heart was in her throat. Something had happened at home. Time and again the operator attempted to get satisfactory connections. Finally she spoke: "It is impossible to get the party calling. The storm has broken the wires." Nothing definite . . . nothing but that far-away call from the eerie wires of the air. It had come from out the dark night like the call of a bittern for its mate. Only distress could have sent it.

Nell hung up the receiver, every fiber of her body taut with suspense and anxiety.

"Don't worry; you'll get a telegram," Sylvia assured her.

"No," Nell said stonily; "you can't send a telegram from Meadows after six." She got out her time tables. Yes, she could start that night, but it would get her nowhere. For hours she would have to wait at Poplar Junction. At five in the morning she would leave. Quietly she went into her room, shut the door

and packed her bag. Mechanically she undressed and went to bed. *Something had happened.*

Lying there in the grim midnight of her anxiety, out of the chaotic condition of her mind she evolved the decision that one of six things had happened. She knew it as definitely as though an occult power were hers:

1. Ed was drowned.

2. The baby had one of those terrible summer diseases which swoop down unlooked for —spinal meningitis, perhaps.

3. Josephine, riding over the country highways with the Mellons, had been injured or killed in an auto wreck.

4. Craig, with his craze for investigating machinery, had fallen from the top of Uncle Sammie's windmill.

5. Nicky, his love for dogs amounting to recklessness, had been bitten by a strange mad one.

6. Gramma, with her irregular heart, had died suddenly.

Over and over in cold tenseness she sorted

out the items. Life without Ed— Why, to take Ed away was to break her very mind and heart and body in twain. Life without the patter of the baby's new, wobbling footsteps; without her only, loved daughter; without serious-eyed Craig, or mischievous Nicky, or kind old Gramma. If she had only stayed home or gone happily with them to Wood Lake! Like the leaves of an old scrapbook she turned over and over little scenes of their former vacations. It seemed the loveliest thing on earth—the memory of those simple camping trips, when they had all been together, alive, well. and contented. Her prosaic everyday work at home appeared now, a glorified, beautiful thing. She had come to the land of her heart's desire, and lo! the only land she wanted was the dear, substantial one of everyday happenings.

In the first hours of the morning she fell into a short, troubled sleep, to waken to the ghastly uncertainty of what the day might bring forth. As the clouds in the east lifted, she dressed. Sylvia, insisting on a bite of

breakfast, tried to reassure her. "Why, Nell, if I were worried every time I receive a message! . . . But then, I realize I've no one so close to me."

As she tried with outward calm to sip her coffee, Nell began to tell her old chum good-by. "Sylvia, I want you to know that up to the moment of that call I had one of the most glorious times imaginable. And I want to make a confession before I leave: Up to that moment, I was envying you from the bottom of my heart—your position, your prosperity, your freedom. I was even trying to find a plan to lift out of the way all the obstacles to my own freedom."

Sylvia McManus reached a well-kept hand across the little breakfast table and placed it over Nell's. "Nellie," she said gravely, "for everything in this world we pay the price. You bought your lovely family with your freedom; and the price I pay for freedom is—heartache. I have an infinite capacity to love—and no husband. I have the heart of a mother—and no child. We say the world progresses,

and it does. Women have come up out of slavery and serfdom; they can stand shoulder to shoulder now with the men of the business, scholastic, and political world. But there are some fundamentals to which the normal woman will always look with longing eyes. In the last analysis, nothing can take the place of them: Love, home, children. I've put my heart and soul into the business, and results show it. I'm rather justly proud of what I've accomplished. And yet—all I really want is a corner of my own, green and shady and restful, where I may sit and . . . rock the baby I never had."

To be sure the engineer did not know it, but Nell Cutter ran the train that morning. Straight in her seat she sat and pushed the big engine with her body. The short wait at Poplar Junction seemed interminable. Wakeland! . . . Osborne!! . . . Meadows!!! Old Mr. Jarman, one of the neighbors, was standing on the platform. In an agony Nell asked him, "What has . . . happened at our house?"

"Can't prove it by me. Just got in myself,

on Number Six. I'll take you home. Left my car standin' here. I say Meadows is the only place in the country you could leave a car parked by the *dee*po all night."

They rounded the corner of Sycamore Street. The low, rambling house stood in a flood of noon sunshine. The front door was open. Softly she went in. She could hear voices in the dining-room. To her sensitive ear they seemed low, murmuring, as of some one comforting another. Without sound she came to the dining-room door.

The table was set. There was food upon it. Nay, more, there were people gathered about it partaking of that food. Gramma was there, her heart evidently pumping along at its regular rate. The baby was there, his spine sturdily holding up his fat, square body. Ed was there, no flowers dripping Ophelia-like on his hair nor other evidence of having been in the water. Josephine was there, unscarred and unscathed from her late automobile accident. Craig was there, dexterously using all his erstwhile broken limbs to reach

an appalling length down the table for a slice of bread. Nicky was there, with white froth on his mouth, but it came from a glass of fresh, creamy milk and not from hydrophobia. They were *all* there, eating heartily, conversing pleasantly.

Josephine was the first to look up. With a cry, the little girl was upon her mother. Immediately Nell found herself sucked down into a very maelstrom of arms. And she, who had been about to weep from the dizzy reaction, found herself laughing, even if a bit hysterically.

Over the heads of the children she asked: "Why did you phone, Ed? What was the matter?"

"Matter?" Ed was cheerfully matter-of-fact. "Why, I just called you up to tell you we all got home sooner than we expected, and it wouldn't make us sore if you'd come back, too. But I couldn't get you, on account of the storm, I guess. Why? Were you worried?"

"Worried? Oh, *Ed!* And how did you all

happen to come home before your time was up?"

"Everybody got homesick, I guess. I know I was good and ready to come. Maybe I'm getting old, but I can't say sloshing around in steaming rubber boots and soaking up water and gasoline is all that it's cracked up to be."

Out of a perfect avalanche of talk, the mother was able to hear from Josephine, "I got awful tired of dressing up and doing stiff things. I just died to come home, where you feel easy." And Craig putting in, "I never liked it very well at the last. I had to pull turnips. Gee, I hate turnips!" And Nicky's complaint, "Aunt Emma, she kept having me wash myself all the time. I don't need to wash again for quite a while." The baby, whose vocabulary was as limited as his experience, hid his face in his mother's neck, and said, "Mom-mom."

"And you, Gramma, did you have a good time?"

Gramma flushed. "I hate to say it, but it was a little disappointing. She's changed so.

She talked of nothing but her various illnesses and those of her friends. She was always telling the details, how somebody had a tumor as large as a grapefruit, or that they took so many quarts of water from some one when they tapped him. It was very gruesome and tiresome. She slept in her chair a great deal, and when she'd waken, she'd begin again: 'I forgot to tell you about Cousin Laura's gall bladder. They took seventeen stones. . . .' "

Ed and Nell had a good laugh over Gramma's tale of woe, and then Ed put the whole thing into a nutshell: "Anyway, I've found out what a vacation is for. It isn't that you have such a darned good time when you're *on* it as that you're so ready to get back into the good old comfortable work harness again when it's over."

It was in the evening, when the two were alone, that Ed said: "I haven't asked about Sylvia. How is she?"

"Oh, big and broad, vitally interested in all the new movements and very prosperous, but not what you'd call happy."

"How about you? Meadows and three meals per look pretty tame I'll bet."

"No! . . . I'll tell you, Ed. If a town like Meadows is your *home,* and the people you care for most in the world are there, why, then, Chicago and New York and London and Paris haven't very much to offer."

"Glad to hear you say it, Mrs. Cutter. I had an idea that being with Sylvia and doing her kind of things might make you feel discontented."

For the flicker of an eyelash, Nell had a wild notion to tell Ed about her mental processes of the past week, how she had been to the end of the world and back again. Then she thought better of it. For one thing it had been an emotional trip—that journey of her mind—and she was too tired to live it over. And Ed? Good, reliable, lovable Ed, could he follow her on that swallow's flight, or understand if he followed? So she only laughed, and said quite casually, "Thank you kindly, Mr. Cutter, I'm very well satisfied with my 'umble lot."

CHAPTER V

JOSEPHINE ENCOUNTERS A SIREN

SUMMER shook down its last rose petal Asters bloomed in the Meadows dooryards. The school bell rang. Nell sometimes felt that she herself was still in school and her four children were the problems.

"Ed," she would say, "I wish youngsters were like the pages of the arithmetic where the problems are all alike. When you've worked one, you know, it's easy to work them all. But, believe me, they're like the miscellaneous pages at the end of the chapters, where you have to use your brains."

She was right. There is no modeling machine in the world whereby one child can be made a replica of another. You cannot lay a paper pattern on a checked-gingham child and turn out a blouse-waist citizen. Craig, for instance, was a dreamer, slow of thought, speech,

and action. But let him formulate an idea of his own, and he clung to it like a puppy to a boot. Nick was quick, impulsive, a live wire.

"Nick goes off half-cocked," Ed would sometimes complain.

Even the baby had begun to develop traits that never had appeared in the others. Josephine, with her twelve years, presented a problem entirely different from the boys'. The twelve-year-old girl is at the ugly duckling stage, too old to be cunning and too young to be cute.

For weeks at a time Nell would live her own life over in her daughter. "*I* experienced that," she would say. "I know just how she feels." Then suddenly she would be confronted by a trait so foreign that she failed to understand her.

If at times their little daughter was a puzzle to Nell, Ed did not even attempt to follow the intricate labyrinth of her emotions. "She's too much for me," he would admit. "You'll have to be responsible for her."

So Nell Cutter put a great deal of time and

thought on her daughter's various small problems. Before spells of wild weeping or pensive melancholy, she would pause at the demand on her motherhood as the peasant heeded the Angelus.

But more of Josephine's days were happy than sad. For Josephine had a friend, and all the world knows that he who has a friend drinks deeply of the wine of life. Her name was Effie Peterson. And David cleaved not more to Jonathan than did Josephine unto Effie.

Across the alley from the Cutters and two blocks down lived Effie with her parents and so many brothers and sisters that people always said, "*Where* do they *put* them all?" Chris, the father, had arrived in Meadows, via Ellis Island, some twenty years before. A year later he had married Stena Jensen, Gramma Cutter's good, kind Stena, who had lived in the family for years. And now the Petersons' daughter Opal, aged seventeen, was working for Ed and Nell; and Effie, one of Opal's younger sisters, was Josephine's close

friend. Very democratic, you see, were the Cutters. . . .

Rather stolid and lacking in originality was Effie. It was Josephine who supplied all the ideas for play. Effie was only the Friday to Josephine's Crusoe, the Celia to her Rosalind. There were times when Effie's stolidity dragged down on Josephine's flights of fancy like sandbags on a balloon. Josephine had never heard that a friend should bear a friend's infirmities. But Effie was a good listener, and in this she had ample opportunity to practice the art, for Josephine read aloud to her a great deal, both compositions of her own and other eminent writers. Of late years Josephine had written long imaginative stories: "The Quest for the Golden Lily," "The Fruit of the Whispering Tree," "The Prince and the Lovely Lady." She loved juggling with words.

"When words are put together right they're just like singing," she told Effie. And she was right. It is like bathing in rippling water to work in the midst of singing words. And

Effie, loving the stories almost as much as their author, was a most satisfying friend.

And then, behold, in the mellow September days, into Josephine's life breezed a new friend in the person of Miss Madeline Vance of Dale City, and Josephine welcomed her as the roses in May. She was Mrs. Brisbane's niece, and she was many things that Effie was not: pretty, vivacious, sparkling. She played gay, noisy, syncopated pieces on the piano, beside which Josephine's "Waterlily Waltz" and "March of the Brownies" sounded flat, insipid. She spoke slang phrases for which Josephine had to ask the meaning. She sang barbaric, unmusical things which Josephine had never heard. And Josephine was fascinated . . . "fell for her," the newcomer herself would have expressed it. Do not be harsh in your judgment of the little twelve-year-old. Stronger-minded individuals have been flattered into thinking the song of the siren was only for them. *Who knows not Circe, daughter of the Sun?*

In the four weeks that Miss Vance honored

Meadows with her presence she attended the town school. Although fourteen years of age, she was in Josephine's and Effie's classroom, for in spite of all her showy ways, her shallow little pate was strangely dull.

The first Monday night after school the three girls walked home together. Madeline hung on to Josephine with barnaclelike adherence.

"What kind of ancestors did you have?" she wanted to know.

"Well, my grandfathers were both *pioneers,*" Josephine told her. "And 'way back their grandfathers fought for our country. My mother and all my aunts are Daughters of the Revolution."

"*My* people were all capitalists," Madeline informed them; "very wealthy capitalists."

"What's that?" Effie inquired. "Capitalists?"

"Oh, don't you know, Effie?" Josephine enlightened her. "They work in the Capitol . . . make the laws and things."

"I think it's nice to know your ancestors

were always wealthy and *high class.* What did your grandfather do?" Madeline peered around at Effie.

"He lived in Denmark," Effie said. "He kept some cows and sold milk." Then she added hastily, "He still lives there yet." Sometimes Effie's English showed redundancy.

Madeline pinched Josephine's arm and giggled into it. Effie, vaguely aware of the concealed mirth, added defensively, "He's a nice old man. He come clear over here once to visit us, and he gave every single one of us a dollar."

Madeline had another half-hidden outburst. Josephine wanted to run her arm through Effie's, too, but the spell of the siren was upon her and she refrained. Not once as they parted at the corner did Effie look back. She was no dog to lick your hand, was Effie Peterson.

Immediately, Madeline's pent-up laughter burst forth on the Meadows air. It seemed very easy for Madeline to laugh. "Isn't she

*kill*ing? Imagine it! That old *foreigner* and his *cows.*"

Josephine laughed also, a little dubiously—but she laughed.

In the days that followed some other things about the fascinating Madeline that were new to Josephine came to light. "I don't know why boys like me," she confided petulantly. "But they just do. Three of them fought over me in Dale City."

"Oh, how *terrible!*" Josephine sympathized. But the petite cause of the battle only laughed.

"Oh . . . I don't know as I'd call it terrible."

Another day Josephine politely offered to read some of her stories to the newcomer, to be met with, "Excuse *me!* I don't like to read. It's too poky. Of course," she added, "I'll probably read more when I get older." But, of course, she never would. So seldom do the Ethiopians change their skins or the Madeline Vances become bookworms.

At the end of the first week, the whole Cutter family being gathered in the living

room, Craig, with that delicate way of nine-year-olds, blurted out, "Josie don't play with Effie any more or even walk home with her. Effie feels bad, too; Heinie said so."

It was an unpropitious moment, and Josephine looked daggers at Craig.

"If you're neglecting Effie for Madeline Vance, I'm disappointed in you, Josephine." Her mother was genuinely disturbed at this turn in the daughter's character. "Whatever you do, don't turn old friends aside. A great thinker has said:

"Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel."

"And the wisest of men said, 'A friend loveth at all times,' " Gramma added gently.

"Well," Josephine tossed her head in imitation of the airy one of Miss Vance, "I think it's awfully odd for me to run around with the sister of our—our *servant.*"

It was like a high explosive in the peaceful

circle. "Servant? . . . Opal Peterson? When did you get that idea in your head?" Nell was as exasperated as she was amazed.

"Why, Josephine," Gramma put in, "Stena is one of the *best* women—"

"Well, Madeline says that *her* folks are wealthy capitalists and all too aristocratic to do that."

Ed took a hand. "That Vance girl said that tomfool thing? By George, that makes me hot! Aristocratic capitalists! Listen to that, Nell. Chris Peterson's worth a carload of fellows like that girl's dad, the anemic tailor's model. Good heavens! He still owes the drug store here a hundred and sixteen dollars for smokes—the dead beat! And here's Chris Peterson for you—walked into Doc Rhodes' office and says, 'Doc, my bill's forty-two dollars and a half. Here's the two-and-a-half to-day, and I'll pay you five a week for the next eight weeks.' Doc'll get it too, every cent, and a lot sooner than he could pry it out of that windjammer Vance. You tell that Vance girl— No, of course not," Ed

broke off, ashamed of his display of feeling. "Don't tell her anything. Her uncle is one of my best clients and her aunt a friend of mama's. I wouldn't hurt them for worlds. But if anything gets under my collar it's snobbishness. You kids remember this, if you forget everything else I've ever told you: There's no class but the class of decency, and no caste but the caste of respectability."

And this is where the unlooked-for twist in the mind of the little twelve-year-old came in. With her parents democratic to their finger tips, she just went quietly ahead in her aristocratic pose. Children are not merely adjuncts to their parents, little arcs in the family circle. They are personalities.

Nell was worried. But she did not know just what to do. You may forbid a child to continue a friendship with an unworthy one. But you cannot force him to accept another as a friend. Friendship is not made to order. It comes from within. Quite often she discussed it with Ed. "I do wish I could shelter my children all the time. There's an old song

of Burns's that my mother used to sing. It always comes to my mind when I see the children getting into anything wrong or foolish:

"Oh, wert thou in the cauld blast,
On yonder lea, on yonder lea!
My plaidie to the angry airt
I'd shelter thee. I'd shelter thee!"

"You can't shelter kids, Nell," Ed told her. "They're bound to run up against all sorts of things. The only way to do is to teach them right conceptions and let them handle their own problems."

In the weeks that followed, Josephine, continuing to ignore Effie, went constantly with Madeline, adored her, imitated her, quoted her. "The day that Madeline goes home," she told the family, "will seem like somebody has *died.*"

And then there was to be a program on the very afternoon which was Madeline's last. There were great preparations in Miss Goddard's room, for there was to be a complete résumé of the month's work in songs, poems,

stories, and language lessons. For a week the program stood sketchily on the blackboard so that each pupil would know his place. Madeline and Josephine were both on for original stories. Josephine was highly pleased with her assignment. Madeline was not. "The old sardine!" she pouted.

"The Knight of the Great White Castle," was Josephine's story. Never had such lovely words come to her mind, sung themselves down her thrilling fingers. "Want to hear my story, Effie?" she asked magnanimously one evening when the former brought Opal a message from home.

"It's grand," was Effie's verdict. "As if it was out of a book." It seemed rather nice to have Effie's flattering opinion again.

On the evening before the program Josephine and Madeline caught up with Effie, and deigned to walk with her. The three talked of the coming event.

"I'm going to wear my new dress and new shoes," Josephine informed the others.

"I've got a new dress, too," Effie volun-

teered, "and new shoes, brown ones. . . . I just love 'em."

"Oh, I wouldn't wear anything different, for just an old program," was Madeline's withering retort.

At the gate Madeline caught Josephine's arm. "Let me take your story home, please, *pretty* please! Just to see if mine's as good . . . and long enough."

Josephine did not want to do it. It was like having her child sleep away from home all night. But she gave in. She would do anything for Madeline.

On the day of the program the first important event in the Cutter household was Nell's decision that she could not attend. The baby had awakened with a hard cold and she was "going to get right after it."

By noon Josephine was too nervous to eat. She had spells of crying violently and laughing hysterically, and she slapped Craig. Yes, a twelve-year-old girl is a very difficult young person.

Miss Goddard's room was in gala attire. In

the session before recess there was that which was politely termed "regular work," although not the slightest thing was accomplished. Effie and Josephine had on their new things. Effie's dress was tomato colored. Her mother had meant it to be crimson, but made the dye water too weak. Madeline went into a gale of laughter over it at recess. "And her shoes—did you see them? *Square* toed; and maybe she calls that brown, but I call it a dirty yellow."

Some of the parents had already arrived when the pupils filed back in. Others came after the classes were seated. One of these was Mr. Chris Peterson. He was big and blond and scrupulously clean, having used cornmeal, soap, and a lemon on the hands which daily came in contact with coal. He wore his Sunday suit, his flat satin necktie, and a huge lodge emblem on his watch chain. He tiptoed to his seat, but squeaked as he walked. At first he put his hat under the chair but at intervals he took it out and held it.

Mr. Baxter, the superintendent, came and

stood in the doorway at the back of the room. Miss Goddard explained that the pupils themselves were to vote on the number of the afternoon's program which pleased them most. The program began.

Josephine nervously watched the board as the various numbers were given. The essay about Hans Christian Andersen was finished. It was getting near her own turn. How dry her mouth was! If she only had a drink! It was down to Madeline now. Madeline was walking up to the front. "The name of my story," she was saying, "is 'The Prince's Journey.' "

Suddenly, Josephine, vaguely listening, felt her whole body go numb with surprise and fright. *Madeline was using her story.* The change of a few words, an occasional incident, was all the difference. Stunned, as though half under a horrible anesthetic, she sat. How *could* Madeline! And what would *she* do in a few minutes when this next song was finished? Get up and explain to Miss Goddard before them all? Over in one corner sat Madeline's

uncle and aunt. She remembered her father's words: "I wouldn't hurt them for worlds." She looked over at Effie. Effie, too, was suffering. How honest and clean Effie looked! Across the room the very heart of Josephine called to its old playmate: "Oh, Effie, Effie, what shall I do?"

As the song stopped short on its last lusty note, Effie Peterson stood up by the side of her seat. That was Miss Goddard's particular mode of procedure in regard to asking questions. Instead of the time-honored method of raising the hand, in Miss Goddard's room one approached the throne, as it were, by rising and standing mutely until recognized by her. It was a sort of "What wilt thou, Queen Esther?" Effie, standing silently now by her seat, was the personification of appeal. She might have been cast in bronze as a statue of "The Suppliant." Against the white of her face the freckles stood out like pale seeded raisins.

Miss Goddard's nostrils dilated. The children knew well what that little rabbitlike wiggling of her nose meant. It was that

underneath the soft velvet of her voice, another voice unknown to the parents, was speaking, "How dare you?"

"Miss Goddard, may I please speak to Josephine Cutter?"

"Is it necessary?" The satin of her voice lay over a cake of ice.

"Oh, yes, Miss Goddard."

There was a prolonged hush as the little girl crossed the room. Josephine heard the squeak-squeak of the yellow-brown shoes coming toward her. Over her desk bent Effie, an odor of soap, boiled cabbage, and strong cologne coming from her. Under the desk and into her hands Effie was thrusting a folded piece of paper. "Read this one," Effie was whispering; "it's still better yet."

Josephine unfolded the paper. In Effie's prim vertical handwriting the headlines stared at her:

The Quest for the Golden Lily
Written by my Best and Dearest Friend
Josephine Cutter. Copied by me in
MEMORY of our FRIENDSHIP

There was another tense stillness broken only by the squeak-squeak of the returning yellow shoes. Miss Goddard stood aloof, silent, critical. She had wanted the affair to go off like clockwork, had not expected it to be halted by one of the humblest.

"Are you ready, Josephine?"

"Yes, Miss Goddard."

As Josephine read her story—the story written a year before—she was conscious of the satisfied, loving look, the maternal look in the light blue eyes of Effie. Yes, "A friend loveth at all times."

Miss Goddard passed the slips of paper upon which the votes were to be cast. When they were taken up, she looked them over, and announced: "The voting is in favor of Madeline Vance's story. This seems very nice and appropriate—a delicate little courtesy to one who is leaving us."

There was a closing song. While it was being sung, Mr. Baxter was talking to Mr. Peterson. If any one else had talked while the singing was going on it would have been a mis-

demeanor. Certain rare privileges accompany the superintendency.

The song was over. Mr. Baxter, from the doorway, was speaking. The children all turned toward him. Miss Goddard smiled, a satiny, ingratiating smile, with only a basket of peaches underneath it.

"You've been telling us to-day about Hans Christian Andersen"—Mr. Baxter's voice seemed to boom through the room like a muffled saxophone—"so I think you'll be especially interested to know that one of our own townsmen is a direct descendant of one of Andersen's best and closest friends. When Andersen was young, and just beginning to write, when his community was laughing at what it thought were crude stories, this man encouraged and helped the boy. He was the great-grandfather of our own esteemed citizen, Mr. Chris Peterson. Mr. Peterson tells me that his own father, living near Copenhagen, has a volume of Andersen's 'Fairy Tales,' and inscribed in it is this: 'To one of the truest friends that ever lived. From Hans

Christian Andersen.' That's a priceless volume, really worth many, many dollars. But it seems to me even a greater thing to hand down as a heritage—true friendship. Wealth may go. Fame is fickle. But to have a friend—that is a worth-while possession. No wonder the Petersons are among our most substantial families, when the blood of a true friend runs in their veins."

Poor Chris twirled his hat on enormous thumbs and grinned sheepishly. It was almost as though, while living, he were hearing his funeral eulogy. But one must pay the price for publicity.

Josephine's honest little heart was full to bursting. Strangely enough, at dismissal she did not wait to thank Effie. Neither did she confront Madeline. Alone and straight for home she ran. At sight of her mother, the story burst from her. It ended with "She *stole* . . . and she likes silly things . . . and she was unkind to Effie . . . and I'm *glad* she's going home." The Queen of Scorn might have said it. Then, quite suddenly, Josephine's

anger gave way to grief, none the less poignant because it was only a little girl's grief. They are wrong who think childish woes are more endurable, less tragic than others. They are more pathetic, for a child has no philosophy to aid him.

"Something," she sobbed uncontrollably, "something inside of me *hurts* so when I think how lovely she seemed."

Dumb with pity, sympathetic to the last fiber of her being, Nell Cutter stroked her little daughter's bowed head. She, too, had known her idols of clay.

Josephine sat up and wiped her eyes. "What was that verse you told me—the one about grappling-hooks?"

Nell did not smile. It is a wise mother that knows when not to laugh. "It was Shakespeare who wrote it:

"The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel."

"Well, I know one thing," Josephine was making her own irrevocable decision; "I'm going to grapple Effie all the rest of my life. Can't I have her over to-morrow and begin?"

"It would be lovely." The mother was all enthusiasm. "You can have a lunch in the playroom—sandwiches and roll jelly cake and lemonade."

Long after Josephine had gone to bed, Nell Cutter tiptoed in and looked at her little daughter sleeping. Poor little girl! What a day of disillusion—and discernment—it had been! Through the mother's brooding heart it sang itself again:

Oh, wert thou in the cauld blast
On yonder lea, on yonder lea,
My plaidie to the angry airt.
I'd shelter thee, I'd shelter thee!

She stepped to the window and looked out at the night, where over the sleeping town the stars hung low, thick, aster-white. The boughs of the maples swayed lightly, like dim masts

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dipping through foam. She was thinking deep, wistful thoughts of her children. And her thoughts were these: "If we could only shield you from the bitter storms you will encounter out yonder on the lea! But we cannot. Ed was right. We may only teach you to weave warm, stout plaidies of your own."

CHAPTER VI

THE NICEST HOUSE IN TOWN

JOSEPHINE'S affair with the Brisbanes' niece was scarcely over when Nell herself plunged headlong into an experience with Mrs. Brisbane. It grew out of an old longing of Nell's that she had cherished for years.

Every normal woman has some overwhelming desire hidden in the secret chamber of her heart. It may be the dream of a three-years' sojourn in foreign countries, or the vision of a new kitchen sink. But the wish is always there, quite definite, often unspoken. She firmly believes that with its attainment will come complete happiness.

Nell Cutter's consuming desire was not an unvoiced one. On the other hand, she spoke of it so frequently that it seemed as much a part of her as her wedding ring. It was a *new house*.

For fourteen years the family had lived in a

rambling white house set well back in a big yard. A heterogeneous collection of maple, elm, and apple trees surrounded it, lilac bushes and snowballs bloomed with friendly perennial interest, and a winding path led to a little plum thicket in the rear. The yard was pretty enough, but the house had never satisfied Nell. As it had been added to year by year, it had taken upon itself many pleasant features. But, architecturally speaking, it was a nonentity. Nell had to wrap her dust cloth around the broom and then stand on a table in order to wipe the ceiling in one part of the house. In other rooms she could quite deftly kill a fly on the ceiling with the slapper by merely jumping up on her toes. But the thing which sustained her in the face of these discrepancies was the thought of the new house which they would one day build.

"What do we want a new house for?" Ed would ask. "This one is as convenient and comfortable as can be." That was the Cutter of it, thought Nell. "Convenient and comfortable!"

"And about as artistic as on old shoe," she would retort.

She accumulated a perfect swarm of plan books. Never did an architect casually insert an advertisement in a magazine but that the name of Mrs. Edward E. Cutter, of Meadows, would promptly appear on his mailing list.

For a long time the array of house plans confused her. With knit brows she pored over them by the hour. "Ed," she would say, "I can't for the life of me make up my mind which is most pleasing: Early English, Colonial, or Modern Dutch."

Ed would wink at the children: "Then there's Modern Fiji Islander and Early Eskimo."

She would ignore this. "But whatever else it has, it's going to have a lovely sun parlor."

"What in thunder's a sun parlor good for?" Ed would be frankly puzzled. "If you want to sit in the parlor, you're welcome to, and if you want to sit in the sun, there's loads of it in Meadows."

But the day came when she definitely chose

it. It was Modern Colonial. The exterior in its rigid simplicity, the interior in its width of space and appealing arrangement satisfied the very soul of her.

It now becomes necessary to lead out, with a great clanking of chains, the Cutter's family skeleton and let the world look it over. Some families are born with skeletons already in their closets. Some achieve them. The Cutters' had been thrust upon them. It was nine years now since it had arrived in a perfect cataclysm of stunned surprise. Its name was Debt. Ed had an old friend. They had been boys together and roommates at college. The friend had needed a bondsman for an estate of which he was made guardian. Ed had signed the bond—had signed it as readily and freely as he would have written his name in his friend's autograph album. Well—for trust in his fellow man, he had given his pound of flesh. For nine years now he had paid the price and the family had paid it with him. When the friend's finances crashed, and the tampered guardianship money crashed with

them, Ed had borrowed the whole, huge, sickening amount, and paid interest on it.

"What's interest?" Josephine had asked once when she was smaller.

"It's an animal that eats the trimming off your dress and the paint off the house," Nell had retorted acridly. But Ed had explained it in child language. Ed Cutter was a good father.

It was true. Interest, so far as the Cutter family was concerned, was an omnivorous creature. It had eaten a new set of travel books and the overcoat which Ed needed. It had swallowed a vacation trip and a set of dining-room chairs. Once it would have taken Josephine's music lessons if Nell had not appeasingly thrown it the new dressing table which she had planned to buy. And every year Ed gave his fattest fees, like fishes to a trained seal, to satisfy the appetite of the principal.

Nell was bitter about it. Ed's attitude was more philosophical. "It's happened, and it's a terrible jolt. I could let it change my entire

outlook on life. But, by George, *it's not going to.*"

So back and forth unceasingly went Ed Cutter to his work, never wavering in energy or courage.

With the arrival of the debt, the hope for a new house was shattered into a thousand fragments. But never did Nell Cutter give up the thought of it. There were long periods when, forgetting her longing, she would sing about the old place, thrilled at the thought of repapering a bedroom or buying new curtains for the living room. Then, like the breaking forth of an old cankerous disease, would come her bitterness and her desire.

These had taken on new life when the Brisbanes moved to Meadows. Mrs. Tom Brisbane was a strainer. She strained at gnats and camels with equal avidity. She believed in putting her best foot forward; and if the other one had no shoe on it, at least the public would not know. She was of the type which would rather put its children to bed while their only suits of underclothes were being washed,

than give up having a card party with a cut-glass pickle dish for a prize. But Mrs. Brisbane had wonderful taste, which was more than some of the good souls in Meadows possessed.

"You're the only one who understands my temperament," she confided to Nell. Later she said, "When we build, I'm going to show Meadows a *real* house. There isn't one here that is up to my ideal."

Nell looked about her. It was quite true. Across the street stood the Horners' old-fashioned upright-and-ell, with a picket fence of ancient cut. On the corner was Charlotte Gray-Cooper's cottage remodeled into a bungalow, like a made-over dress. Farther down stood the Ramsey's square house, white and shining, but stiff as a dry goods box, with a porch across the front. Hitherto she had thought of them as so many homes. Now, with the eyes of the artistic Mrs. Brisbane, she saw them only as hodge-podge affairs, homely and unattractive.

And when Tom Brisbane came to Ed confidentially with a chance to get in on the

ground floor of a good money-making proposition, she began to feel that the realization of her hope for a picturesque house might come true.

Ed went into the subject thoughtfully and painstakingly. "No," he decided. "It listens well, Nell, but it's a gamble, and therefore shaky."

Nell was so disappointed that it made her sharp: "*You* wouldn't keep money you found lying in the road."

"No," said Ed soberly, "I wouldn't . . . not if it didn't belong to me."

But the deal did not turn out to be shaky. The Brisbanes began to get dividends—big ones. That in itself made Nell cross about Ed's conservatism. But when the Brisbanes started their new house her heart was full. She shed tears of salt. It seemed so thoroughly the one thing worth while.

From the time the foundation was in, Nell haunted the Brisbanes' building spot. When the studding partitioning off the rooms was in place, it dawned upon her: *it was her house.*

No materialized dream, no crystallized vision was ever more identical with her ideal than this. There it stood in all its potential promise; the dining room to the left, the living room to the right, the sun parlor beyond, and in the center the wide, spacious hall, from which the stairs would sweep upward with beautiful proportions.

To be sure, there were scores of finer homes in Dale City, but for Meadows it was the acme of beauty. The last finishing touches were a small Colonial entrance porch, dwarf evergreens in dull antique jars on either side the door, and a dragon-head knocker, which Mrs. Brisbane said was copied from the Brisbane coat-of-arms. And who was there in Meadows to deny it?

As though fortune were not favoring the Brisbanes enough, just as the house was completed Mrs. Brisbane's uncle died and left her some money. Some said it was about twenty thousand; others, with less energetic imaginations, believed it to be about half that sum. With it Mrs. Brisbane bought furnishings for

the house. The things began coming from Dale City: softly blended rugs, overstuffed mohair-covered furniture, dainty fiber things for the sun parlor, brown mahogany for young Fred's room, and ivory for Mayme's.

The finished product was perfect. The Brisbanes gave a party. On the way home Nell talked of nothing else. "Yes, it's pretty fine, all right," Ed admitted. And the little green god made himself quite thoroughly at home . . . settled himself cozily in the heart of Nell Cutter.

And now on this Saturday in October Nell Cutter, having worked all day to get the old home shining, dressed in the late afternoon and walked down town to meet Ed. As she turned into the office, three men came out. Two were strangers. One was Tom Brisbane. In the inner office, she found Ed with a queer expression on his face.

"Well, Nellie, Brisbane's invested once too often. That last stock . . . those big dividends were paid out of other investors' money. Those men were two of his creditors. He'll

have to sell the house. Private sale if it goes soon, under the hammer, if later."

"Oh, *Ed!*" Nell managed. "The stock I wanted you to buy?" The news was like an avalanche crashing by, an avalanche which threw débris in her face but did not hit her. Then, as the dust cleared away and she felt herself safe, her thought was all about the house:

"Oh, Ed, can't *we* get it?"

Ed's face was grave. "I've been thinking of it. I'd like you to have it, Nellie. If the other debt were just cleared up! But maybe we could manage. If we could sell our place this week, I could borrow the rest and give a mortgage on the house."

They talked of their finances for a time, and then Ed began putting away his books and records. Ed Cutter was one of those men who have a few favorite sayings which they bring out with regularity. One of his choice bits was to quote at the close of every week from Burns' "Cotter's Saturday Night." Only he changed the word "Cotter" to "Cutter."

For the first few months of her married life Nell had thought it quite clever. But when you have been married to a man for fifteen years and he says the same thing every week, it becomes an old friend, but without humor. You no longer laugh at it, but you would miss it. So Ed, gathering up his outgoing mail, said as blithely as though it were the original time: "Well, it's Saturday night and so,

"The toil-worn Cutter frae his labor goes,
This night his weekly moil is at an end.
He gathers up his mattocks and his hoes
And weary o'er the moor his hameward course
does bend."

All through the week Nell walked on air. Her heart kept up a continual anthem of joy. Try as she might, her sympathy for Mrs. Brisbane was not as great as her personal happiness. "It's going to be ours," she would say in wonderment "Those lovely rooms . . . that exquisite sun parlor. I'm going to have new furniture, too. I won't move in without

nice things. We'll just add it to the debt. We might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb."

So Ed brought Mr. and Mrs. William Johnson up to look at the old place. The children were in school when they came. Even Gramma was away. "Yes, we've worked hard, and we're comin' in to town now to rest," Mr. Johnson told them.

Nell showed them around. "How nice it is," Mrs. Johnson expressed herself. "So comfortable and convenient!" The words had a familiar sound.

For the rest of the week Nell Cutter moved in a realm of joyous anticipation. She kept it from the children. All they knew was that on Saturday night *perhaps* they were going to have the happiest surprise of their lives.

They moved along slowly, those twenty-four-hour days, until the last one came—Saturday. By noon, Nell was anxious beyond words. They were at the supper table when Mr. Johnson telephoned. Nell jumped like a shot to get the message. When she came back her face was beaming, her breath coming fast.

"All right, children. This is it! . . ." There was dramatic suspense. Forks were poised. Every eye questioned her. "We're going to sell the old house and buy Brisbanes'."

No one spoke. They all seemed dazed. Extreme happiness would do that, she knew. It was Josephine whose mind worked fastest. "Sell our house," she repeated in a little awed whisper, "and move away?"

At this, Nicky, whose brain had finally registered, threw back his head and bellowed to the moon.

Craig did not cry. He was mad. "That old stiff, shiny house? Why, there ain't even a porch . . . just a little peaked chicken coop in front and two feather dusters stuck up in butter crocks."

"There's a sun parlor," Nell protested.

"*I* don't want to sit in no sun parlor. I want to go outdoors where the sun *is*."

"There are no trees," Josephine mourned. "The birds don't come there."

"Oh, my good old room," Gramma lamented, "where I can see the hills. Every

day I say, 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills.' "

"Where'd I keep my guinea pigs?" Craig cross-questioned.

"Where'd T-t-oby st-ay?" Nick bawled.

"Good *land,* what ails this family?" Nell exploded. "I thought you'd be crazy anxious to live in the nicest house in town."

"*This* is the nicest house in town," Josephine said distinctly, "*isn't* it, boys?"

For the only time in their argumentative lives the boys agreed unconditionally with their sister. Nell looked at them in amazement. No, they were not joking. They meant it. They thought the old thing *was* the nicest house in town.

Plainly, Ed was sympathetic with them. "I know how they feel, Nell. It's *home* to them."

"I think it's nicer to have just one home," Gramma put in mildly. "You sort of weave your dreams and desires into the very walls."

There were more disparaging comments from the children. "Now, now!" Ed stopped

them, "that'll do. Mama wants to, and we'll do what pleases mama."

Like a back-stage call, the telephone sounded again. "It's Mrs. Brisbane," Nell announced. "She wants me to come right over. She sounded awfully upset."

When she arrived, Mrs. Brisbane called to her to come right upstairs. As she responded, Nell caught again that wonderful satisfying picture—that sweep of living room, French doors and sun parlor beyond. Her hand lingered lovingly over the dull mahogany rail which swept up the enameled stairs. Mrs. Brisbane was in a big chair by the bed. She had a cloth on her head. At sight of Nell, she burst into hysterical tears and broken sentences. "I never was so treated in my life! . . . I wish I was dead! . . . It's awful . . . Tom just talked awful to me! . . . He accuses *me* of getting him into this—*me!* My whole family's deserted me . . . Fred . . . I don't know where he is half the time. . . . Mayme . . . she never tells me a *thing.* I heard to-day, from another source that she—

she's going to marry him anyway—that Ray Blake. . . . Well, she don't need to bring any youngster of his here. . . . I wouldn't *touch* it. Oh, it's awful. I wanted you to come. You're the only one in this town who understands me."

Nell had a sudden revolting thought that this well-meant compliment might not be greatly to her credit.

"I've schemed and schemed for my children," the woman went on, "and worked their father time and again to gratify their wants . . . planned this house as nice as I could for them . . . and *this* is what I get for it. . . . They go off every evening and leave me alone . . . and their father takes his hard luck out on *me!*" There were more random complaints and then: "What I really sent for you for was about the furniture. I'm in an awful pinch. . . . Tom says you folks are going to get the house. I wanted to ask if you'd buy most of the furniture just as it stands. We'll move away, of course; we wouldn't stay *here,* now, the way we've been

treated. It's only about half paid for, and Tom doesn't know it . . . and after to-night I'd kill myself before I'd tell him. Schmidt and Mills keep *dinging* at me, just *hound* me, when I haven't a cent more to pay. I thought if you'd pay me cash, I'd let you have it for about three-fourths of its actual cost—then—I could make another payment."

Nell's amazement was greater than her sense of propriety. "But we heard . . . your uncle?"

"Oh, that *fortune?* That was only a hundred dollars, but people thought it was more and I just let them." Back she went to her grievances: "He's so *mean,* Tom is . . . about money . . . swears about the bills. What can *I* do? *I* can't help things being high. How'd he like to have us going around looking like gipsies?" There was much more. It was disgraceful, the whole tirade concerning the family and its financial status. The air was stifling. Nell wanted to get away, outdoors, under the stars, on home to her own.

She managed to escape with no definite

promises. Once out in the open, the house she had just left no longer seemed the most beautiful one in town. It seemed the House of Sham. The luxurious chairs were upholstered in falseness, stuffed with lies. The shining enamel was as slippery as deceit. Looking back as she turned the corner it appeared in the moonlight a whited sepulcher with dead men's bones within. As she hurried on, she was mentally confused.

There was with her the vision of people everywhere: men and women, young and old, who were feeding the animals to keep up appearances: Debts, Interest, Principal, Instalments, Mortgages, Loans-on-life-insurance—all the snarling, menacing animals which padded softly forever just back of the crowd. She seemed to see the people continually casting furtive glances over their shoulders, constantly throwing money to them—always trying to cover them so no one would know they were there. With two of them, the house of Cutter had long contended. These were bad enough. And now Mortgage would slip,

leopardlike, into the procession. Interest and Principal had been bad enough. But Mortgage—that ate homes. Lumber, stucco, brick, Modern Dutch, Colonial, Early English—they were all the same to the hydra-headed monster. Constantly, he watched and if you slipped—he ate your home.

She was at home now. The low, rambling house lay still and peaceful under the warm October moon. The swaying elms dipped and beckoned hospitably. The light shone through freshly laundered curtains. In the living room she could see Ed in his big shabby chair with the boys perched on the arms, the boys who could scarcely be driven away from their father's side. Gramma was holding the baby in her comfortable lap, Gramma, who welcomed each grandchild as if it were her own. Josephine was at the piano—Josephine, who told her every thought, who fairly turned her mind inside out for her mother to see. The tasteful arrangement of the old furniture with its good lines, the warm glow of the shaded lights, made the room look softly mellow.

Why, it looked *artistic!* Nell Cutter had eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge!

As Nell went in a man got out of a car and came up to the door. It was Mr. Johnson. Ed was both cordial and businesslike. He took a folded paper from his pocket. "I brought a blank deed home."

Nell went pale. She steadied herself at the back of a chair. Nick, pulling at her sleeve, kept hissing something through his teeth. It sounded like "Can't *have* it. . . . Can't *have* it!" By the side of his father stood Craig, fists doubled, glaring at the intruder as though he were armored and entering a baronial castle. Josephine had gone kitchenward, and Nell was vaguely aware that somewhere along the route she had burst into tears. Gramma got up and went into her own room, as though she did not want to be in at the killing. Only Ed remained cool and unperturbed. Suddenly, Nell Cutter felt that she was selling many things of which she had not taken cognizance. She was selling big feathery lilacs, the odor of apple blossoms, the songs of birds, the hills from whence

cameth her help. She was disposing of her children's birthplace, the shrine of memories, Ed's energy, her own peace of mind. *She* was feeding the animals—to keep up appearances.

"Mr. Johnson," she broke in. "I'm awfully sorry to disappoint you after what I said . . . but I don't want to sell now. There's another house, though . . . the Brisbane's lovely new one. Scarcely any one knows it's for sale. Mrs. Johnson would love it, I know, she's such a good housekeeper. It has as many rooms as this one . . . and a *sun parlor* . . ." she added feebly, carefully avoiding Ed's eye.

Gramma and the children had gone to bed. Ed and Nell were in the kitchen attending to all those little duties which come under the jurisdiction of householders. "Well, Nellie," Ed said cheerfully, "you certainly showed your good sense.

"Princes and lords are but the breath of kings,
An honest man's the noblest work of God.
The cottage leaves the palace far behind.
What is a lordling's pomp? A cumbrous load
Disguising oft the wretch of humankind."

He wound the clock. It had been Gramma's. He could remember seeing the little speckled church on it when he was a tiny boy. He put the key behind the steeple. "Well, it's Saturday night again and so,

"The toil-worn Cutter frae his labor goes.
This night his weekly moil is at an end,
He gathers up his mattocks. . . ."

He broke off. "What's all this stuff piled up in the kindling-box?"

Nell's answer embodied all the elements of curtness, conciseness, and simplicity. "House plans," she said. "Burn 'em up."

CHAPTER VII

THE HOME-COMING

PROBABLY no one of the entire household was so relieved that they were to remain in the old house as Gramma. So often had she summoned here in imagination the relatives and friends of other days that her pleasant room had taken upon itself the nature of a room of memories.

To-day Gramma sat in the big chintz-covered chair by the window. It was a cold November afternoon, but the sun shining through the sleeping branches of the Lombardy poplars seemed to help the fire in the little stove to keep her warm. The house was furnace heated; but Gramma had wanted the stove. "It's more cheerful to look at the red flame than at a black register," she had said wistfully to Ed, and he had immediately complied with her wishes. Ed Cutter was a good son.

On this afternoon Gramma was experiencing the same peaceful, contented feeling she had known in the years when the boys had been little and at home. Soothed by the uniting warmth of the flame and the sun, she nodded . . . dozed . . . awoke . . . dozed. . . . Whether it was in the shadowland of her sleeping or on the borderland of her waking, she did not know; but quite suddenly the room seemed filled with the presence of children.

Gramma knew there could be no such paradoxical thing as a noisy silence, but it seemed quite believable—silent noise. She looked up. By the window Davy was pointing out pictures in the fine frost with his chubby fingers. Johnny was stretched out on the couch reading. Through the window she could see Eddie pulling Joey on a rough homemade sled, their bright-colored mufflers blowing in the breeze. Out by the stable Sammie and Robbie were carrying fodder to the stock, their blue-mittened hands clasped around the huge bundles. It was as plain as day. Every feature was distinct, every gesture familiar, every garment

known to her. They were rosy, animated, substantial. Her six boys . . . at home again . . . and little!

Then Gramma moved, straightened herself, and only the pale November sun flickered over the places where the six had been. Gramma smiled at the passing vision. For in her mind had come the beautiful new thing that was to happen: The boys were really coming. No mind-created vision this time but the flesh-and-blood men . . . five others besides Ed. He and Nell had planned the whole wonderful event. It was to be on the fiftieth anniversary of the day she and father had arrived in the state. Pioneers they had been, strangers in a strange land. Fifty years! Seven years ago father had pushed on without her, pioneering again—in a New Country. Father had been well and strong, she the fragile one. *"Two shall be grinding at the mill. The one shall be taken and the other left."*

The date of the reunion was three weeks away. There had been some talk about hold-

ing it out on the old home place, where Sam was living; but Nell had advised against Gramma making the change in November. So it was to be here at Ed's, where she had lived for the seven years since Father had gone to break the new trail.

All six boys were to be here. Gramma had that day received the last letter of acceptance. It was from the governor of the state, written on executive office letterheads. How queer—her Robbie, the governor! He had marked the date on the calendar, he said, and would let nothing interfere with it. It seemed that no one could stay longer than a day. One day! And the days and nights she had given them! It was natural, of course, that their work should come first. She was nothing if not sensible, old neither in spirit nor mentality like many aged who lose interest in life. How often she had flouted the idea of allowing age to conquer her. She and father used to discuss the question of old age, whether one definitely sensed that he was old. "I don't believe it," Gramma had contended. "There'll

never be a time in my life when I feel myself slipping out of present-day interests."

Gramma rose, stirred the fire, and went back to her chair. The fleeting vision she had caught of the little boys lingered clear, sweet, refreshing. But how much more she would enjoy the real ones—big men doing worth-while things. Over the roll she went in just pride: Rob, the governor; Ed, the lawyer; Sam, the successful farmer; John, an instructor in the state university; Joe, pastor of one of the big churches in Minneapolis; Davy, a surgeon in Chicago. Yes, they had all weathered the storms of youth that so worried her, and turned out so well. So many people asked how she had done it, given six such citizens to the world. She, herself, did not know. Work . . . common sense . . . love . . . prayer!

No longer did Gramma give any thought to the shadowy little boys who lingered about her room. Only on the real men, her little boys grown up, did she think. In three weeks she would see them, visit with them, touch them.

For that one day did Gramma live. In the

days that followed she was paintakingly careful of her health, so that nothing would mar the time. A cold, a headache, one of her pleurisy spells—and the most beautiful event in her life would be spoiled. She watched the weather, scanning the paper for forecasts. Rob was coming in his car. So, of course, was Sam from the farm near by. The others would come on the train.

As the time drew near, Gramma lived in an atmosphere of planning: sleeping arrangements . . . the first lunch . . . the big dinner. She would have liked to get up the whole meal herself, but Nell persuaded her that it was too much, compromising on the chicken dumplings which were to be Gramma's own. It had been a favorite dish of the boys. Other than that she was to leave the whole dinner to Nell and Sam's wife.

On the evening before the big day Gramma bathed, brushed her soft white hair, and laid out the finest of her underclothes.

"Oh, Lord, let nothing happen to keep one child away."

It was late, when, taut with excitement, she relaxed into sleep. But at daybreak she rose stiffly and dressed. The day! Gramma had never read "Pippa Passes," but she would have said that no little mill girl's brief holiday could be more anticipated with the joy of each moment than this one. It proved to be clear, cold, and touched with a flutter of snowflakes which ceased almost as soon as they fell.

Sam and his wife arrived first, so that the latter could help with the work. David, the doctor, and Joseph, the minister, got in on the morning train. The governor came after lunch in a big car with a colored driver in livery and John on the late afternoon train at the close of his university classes. They were all there, with a warm kiss from each and a cheery, "How are you, mother?" pregnant with unspoken things.

"Dear Lord, I thank thee."

The dinner table looked lovely. Nell and Sam's wife had seen to that. There were nuts in wild rose cups, like the roses that had grown by the old trail. The centerpiece was a minia-

ture covered wagon. There were place cards in the shape of the state. Gramma picked one up and peered at it. Fifty years ago the state had been raw prairie land, Indian-inhabited, and wind-swept. Fifty years! She and father had arrived in a wagon with a team, a cow, a few boxes and barrels, and two babies—Sammie, just toddling around on unsteady feet, and Robbie, wrapped in a big gray woolen shawl. And now Robbie was the governor! Wasn't it queer?

Sitting at the head of the festal board, Gramma looked about her. The table seemed surrounded with prosperous-looking men, immaculate and well-groomed in their dark business suits. Sam, the farmer, looked not much different. Save for the leathery tan of his face and the telltale hands, he looked like a professional man, with graying hair and stubby, close-cropped mustache. Robbie was bald-headed. Joey had a Van Dyke beard. There were two pairs of big tortoise-shelled glasses, and a pair of thick-lensed eyeglasses in the crowd.

The boys seemed deeply pleased to see each other. Gramma was glad of that. Brotherliness . . . she had tried to teach it to them. Brotherliness toward each other and toward mankind. The conversation was animated. The voices boomed out vibrant and crisp. They bandied great questions about, sending their opinions back and forth briskly, like balls, catching each other's ideas and hurling back their own: European finance, prohibition, international covenants, the government of China, the future of radio, labor unions, political factions.

"Boys!" Nell broke in at the first momentary lull, "your mother made the dumplings."

"Fine, mother," . . . "I thought she did," and "Taste just the same!" came quickly. They were lovely about it, enthusiastic and boyish. But keen Gramma sensed that they would not have noticed without Nell!

The breezy conversation did not cease with the ending of the delicious dinner. When they adjourned to the living room it kept up—animated, lively, vigorous; railroad strikes,

trade in the Far East, contemporary novelists, the Ku-Klux Klan, aviation, the Irish question.

They had argued a great deal when they had been boys, but it had been about calves and ball games, the chores and lessons. They showed this same argumentative attitude toward each other now, good-natured if earnest, indulgent if warm. How efficient they were! Efficient and sufficient! Sam, the farmer, was by no means behind the others. He and the governor had a discussion about transportation. They stood up and gesticulated.

Each seemed proud to tell the others of some new achievement in his work. Davy spoke of a recent operation, demonstrating with his slim, sensitive fingers some of the technicalities. It had been on a woman who was expecting a child. Old-fashioned Gramma flushed while he told it, even as she marveled at the wonderful work which had saved them both. John was bringing out his second volume of a psychology textbook. Ed had won a case in

the Supreme Court after adverse decisions in both justice and district courts. Even religion seemed on a different basis these days. Joey was telling in crisp details about his church. It was as though Joey's Lord was a more efficient one than Gramma's . . . as though Joey's God was a sort of superbusiness man.

Gramma was vaguely uneasy. "You don't mean, Joey, that you run a moving-picture show in your church?"

"Sure, mother. God was in the cloud and the pillar of fire, the storm, the whirlwind and the burning bush. Why not in the wonderful field of the photoplay?"

The evening was interesting and Gramma was proud of the boys, but it was not just what she had planned. Too loyal to allow herself to admit it, she vaguely knew that she was disappointed. The gathering might have been a political convention, a medical association, or a legislative assembly.

Something was lacking, something she could not name, leaving a sense of loss she could

neither account for nor fathom. They were so mature, so learned. And they did not need her. Through all the animated conversation she had the sensation of a strong wind blowing by her. Something was whirling past her . . . something her hands could not stay. The time she so had looked forward to was being carried swiftly by, and she wanted it to stand still until she could get her bearings. Something seemed to overpower her—a consciousness of time and people rushing by; the twenty-four hours which she could not stay; her boys which she could not hold.

Gramma, sitting in the shadow, suddenly felt that she was very tired. The boys were still talking. They had discussed the transmission of souls and the transplanting of glands. And now they were speaking about young people and children, comparing their own boyhood with modern conditions. For the first time since their arrival they seemed to touch a subject on which they all agreed. Present-day young people, little children, dress, habits —everything was worse than in their time.

They had forgotten her. She did not mind, was glad in fact that they were so enjoying each other.

Ed was bewailing the apparent cowardliness of his little boys, said he couldn't account for it, and it certainly worried him—this yellow streak. Joey said modern dress was the greatest evil of the day. John believed that sex literature and bad pictures were sending youngsters to the dogs. Bob thought dancing was doing the business. Davy recalled how they scrimped and saved their money. "Where'll you find a young fellow doing it now?" he asked. "They'd spend their last cent for some fool fad." Sam said autos had done more harm than all the rest of the things put together. "I've had my boy ask if he could take the car to go to town to get a shoe shine. Lord! Think of it, boys! A farmer's son taking a two-thousand-dollar car to get a ten-cent shine put on for him. Can you beat that, I ask you?"

Gramma, in the shadow, sat listening. Every muscle in her body stiffened. All the

fighting blood in her veins boiled. Smart as they were, she could still teach them a thing or two. Determinedly she got up from her chair. Ed and John, nearest to her, jumped up too.

"Anything you want, mother?"

"Take my chair, mother."

No, she told them, she would be back soon. She went into her bedroom and closed the door, crossed to the old piece of furniture called a secretary, unlocked it and took out a box. From this she took some small brown books, and looking through them marked several of the pages. Then she went back to the living room.

"Boys," she said, so distinctly, so firmly, that they all turned to her, "I used to keep a diary years ago. How I ever found time is more than I can tell, but I got it in some way. You've been talking about children and young people and you've been pretty hard on them. I can't believe that they're so very different. Here, Eddie"—she opened one of the little brown books—"you're the one that spoke

about cowardliness. I'll read from a date of thirty years ago. 'Uncle Edward has been visiting us this week. He must have been disgusted to hear his namesake, Eddie, bawl every night when he started up to bed, for he offered Eddie a dollar if he would go to bed one night without shedding a tear. Eddie thought that was going to be easy; but he got to the foot of the stairs with the dollar in his hand and, then, looking up the dark stairway, burst into tears and bawled, "Here, Uncle Edward, take your old dollar; I don't want it!" ' "

Five of the sons broke into hilarious laughter. "That's one on you, Ed."

"And here," Gramma went on imperturbably, "it says: 'We're having such a trial with Johnnie. He doesn't want to work. He slips out of every job around the place when he possibly can. I found him to-day in the haymow poring over a horribly immoral book. What shall I do? Talking will not do any good. I must get hold of some new books for him, stimulating but wholesome!' "

"By George!" Professor John Rutherford Cutter admitted reluctantly; "I can remember that darned book to this day."

Gramma found another marking: "I'm terribly upset about Robbie being so taken with this new Belle Hunter who has just moved into the neighborhood. I don't like the girl's actions. Last night she and Robbie were mixed up in one of those silly kissing games at the church social. How can I help these boys to weather the storms?"

The governor grinned sheepishly, but the others did more than grin.

The next entry was about Sam. "'Father is so riled,' Gramma read. 'Sam slipped out last night after we were all in bed, hitched up the mare and went away. Betsy had been worked in the field all day. I was so unstrung and stayed up until he came in. Sam says if he can't have a horse and buggy of his own, he'll do it again.' You see, Sammie,"—Gramma turned to her gray-haired boy—"your boy asks for the car, a car that isn't tired—and a two-thousand-dollar car isn't of

any more value to you to-day than our old hundred-dollar Betsy was to us."

Gramma closed the books. But from her lap she took a photograph.

"Here, Davy, is your picture when you were seventeen." She passed it to John sitting nearest, and a roar immediately followed. The photograph showed a young man, so wild-eyed that he looked scarcely sane, standing by a stone imitation of a broken tree trunk. His hand, resting flatly on the sepulchral-looking pedestal, seemed trying to hold it down. His trousers were baggy, his shoulders padded to enormous and hideous proportions. His long thin neck rising from those stuffed shoulders gave him the appearance of a fat camel. Embedded in a satin necktie was a horseshoe pin, large and flamboyant.

"Davy," Gramma said with apparent satisfaction, "I loaned you the money to buy that stickpin and you paid it back when you helped husk corn at the neighbors. So you didn't spend your 'last cent for a fool fad'—you spent money you hadn't even earned."

Before Davy could speak, Gramma went on pleasantly: "And here, Joey, is a picture of your first girl. You haven't forgotten Minnie Deeming? She gave me this picture when she thought I might have a chance to be her mother-in-law."

It was with a genuine shock that the Reverend Joseph Lyman Cutter looked at a likeness of his first love. Below and above a waspish waist the girl's form bulged in a graceless distortion. Though she was in every sense modestly clothed from throat to trailing carpet-sweeper skirt, the ensemble seemed more immodest than the short simple lines of the styles that he had derided.

"Now, boys!" Gramma addressed them, "when you go back, I want you to remember that the same old problems confront parents, even though the fads and fancies and embellishments are new with each generation."

They swallowed it meekly, those six wise men, even as in olden time, under her rigorous discipline, they had swallowed the slippery, slimy oil of the castor bean.

For several hours longer the reunited family sat visiting. Gramma pluckily held out until the last one retired. Again she had a hard time getting to sleep. The excitement and the change from her routine were telling upon her. Toward morning she slept, but rose eagerly to see her boys again for a few more hours.

"How are you feeling, mother?"

"Do you sleep well, mother?"

"How's your appetite, mother?"

They seemed to think the physical side was paramount. Nobody made any confession to her, asked her advice, told her a confidential thing. Nobody but John. He followed her into her room to show her the picture of a girl. She was neither pretty nor extremely plain, but Gramma agreed with John that she was lovely.

It was all over. They were going soon. The boys stood around waiting. Bob and Davy smoked. Joey mentioned his mother. She looked older this time, not so sprightly. This would probably be the last time they would all

be together with her. Nobody answered him. They were neither hard nor unloving. But they did not want to touch the springs of emotion, long unused. They wanted to get away cool and calm, back to the business of the world in absolute command of themselves. Then they would tell her on paper some of the things they could not say.

The governor put down his half-smoked cigar. He wondered if they ought not try to go at different times, to save her from saying good-by to them all at once. "But I've got to get away first," he explained. "The Board of Pardons is waiting for me and a delegation from the striking railroad shopmen."

"I'll have to, too," the doctor put in. "I've an operation, double hernia—J. J. Roseborough, the manufacturer."

"I had to run away from the Board of Missions. It's in session right now," the minister added.

John had his classes at the university and a lecture on psychology. Sam had a lot of

stock—blooded, the ones he was grooming for the state fair, he explained. Daisy Bell II had won first premium the year before for butter fat. Ed, being host, did not mention that he was due in district court the next morning.

Gramma, moving about, picking up little articles here and there, heard them. It was thoughtful of them but not necessary. She told them simply not to mind her, to go when they felt they must. There was lots of work in the world to be done, and she wouldn't want to keep them. So Davy and Joey were going with Bob in his car. He could take them to the main line terminal. The three steeled themselves to say good-by to Gramma. They dreaded her breaking down. The slow anguished tears of the old were so painful to witness. But it was not Gramma who was emotional. She put her arms around each son and patted him on his broad back.

"Be a good boy, Robbie."

"Be a good boy, Joey."

"Be a good boy, Davy."

They were all three choking when they went out to the car. Blind with tears they stumbled a little on the running board.

Gramma, herself, was surprised at her own calm. The parting was not half so terrible as she had anticipated. Something was sustaining her. Some unlooked-for strength was hers.

When they had gone, Sam said quite casually that he and his wife had decided not to go until afternoon. John would stay too, and go with them, catching the northbound in time to get into Dale City for his lecture. They were trying to make it easy for her, Gramma knew. She could see through them like tissue paper.

At noon the three remaining boys kept up a jolly conversation of jokes and reminiscences. It was kind of them. They were good boys.

Then Sam and John were leaving. Sam was bluff and noisy to cover his feelings: "Now, Mother, when you get tired being bossed around by Ed and Nell, you let us know and we'll come and get you."

John whispered, "I'll bring Ruth to see you, mother."

Ed and Nell and Gramma all walked out to the car to see them off.

"Be a good boy, Sammie."

"Be a good boy, Johnnie."

They were all gone now. When the three turned back into the house, Nell put her arm through Gramma's and Ed did the same on the other side. They felt so sorry for her. Nell cried into the kitchen towel from pure sympathy. "What if it were Josephine and Craig and Nick and the baby?"

"Sit down and visit a while, mother?" Ed was ready to sacrifice more time.

"No, I'm tired. I'll be getting back to my room now."

It seemed like a dream that the boys had been there. A burned-out cigar, a silver-mounted brush that Bob had forgotten, a book with Joey's name sprawled across the flyleaf, were all that remained of the visit. Gramma opened the door of her room and went in. The afternoon sun was already slipping over the

tops of the Lombardy poplars. It flooded the room, softly, wanly. They were all gone. It was all over . . . the day for which she had lived. She crossed to her chintz-covered chair and sat down heavily. She began to think the whole thing over, to call up the vision of each boy and the memory of what he had said. Strangely enough she could not seem to visualize them clearly as she wished. The whole thing was a blur—the faces of the boys she loved. The picture seemed only a medley of gray business suits, crisp voices, gesticulations, a Van Dyke beard, some big glasses, a shining head—talk, talk, world questions, vital themes. . . .

It was quiet in here, that brooding quiet which was still noisy with unheard laughter; that queer paradoxical noisy silence. The loss of sleep for two nights had left Gramma drowsy. She nodded. Gray suits . . . glasses . . . gestures . . . talk . . . a strong wind blowing . . . something whirling by . . . something she could not hold. . . . She dozed . . . awoke . . . dozed.

Whether it was in the shadowland of her sleeping or on the borderland of her waking she did not know. But when she looked up Davy was standing by the window tracing pictures in the frost. Johnnie was stretched out on the couch reading. Through the window she could see Eddie and Joey on a homemade sled, their bright-colored mufflers blowing in the breeze. Out by the stable Sammie and Robbie were carrying fodder to the stock, their blue-mittened hands clasped around the huge bundles. It was as plain as day. There was no blurring, no indistinctness. Every feature was clear. They were rosy, animated, substantial little boys. Quite suddenly Gramma knew that she could keep them, that they would not rush away. Time? She could stay it. The boys? She could hold them. The old peace and contentment came back. And Gramma knew why it had come. She put her slender, brown-veined hand to her wrinkled throat. "Now I am old," she said slowly. "I am an old woman. *For the Memories have become real . . . and the Realities have turned to dreams.*"

CHAPTER VIII

MEADOWS ENTERTAINS A CELEBRITY

IN the months that followed Nell Cutter found herself living through one of those dull snowy winters which seemed to possess neither great mountain peaks of pleasure nor deep valleys of discontent. She merely existed as it were on a broad table-land in which neither mountain nor valley was visible. And then, in the middle of February, there came a change —and behold, there lay before her a mountain peak of excitement.

For the most important thing which had ever happened to Meadows during the time she had lived there was the news that Miss Alice Duffield was coming to lecture. Years before, Alice Duffield had spent part of her girlhood nine miles from Meadows, in the Willow Creek district, receiving in the meantime a more or less inaccurate education in a little dry-goods box of a schoolhouse. Since then

Alice Duffield had become one of the nation's big writers, her name in countless papers and magazines, her books on hosts of shelves, her place established among the great ones!

The older Cutter boys had gone to school with her. Ed, himself, recalled her as a tall, lanky girl with a shock of short brown hair —not bobbed, merely sheared—in which she wore a red circular rubber comb. To Nell's persistent inquiries concerning her early literary talents, he would say: "I can only remember that she was jolly and could run like a sand-hill crane."

And now Miss Duffield, who had been out on a lecture tour, was coming to honor the Meadows Woman's Club with her presence and her speech. To Nell it seemed an amazing thing: the anticipated arrival in that little town of a woman so admired, so quoted. Yes, it was by far the biggest thing that had ever happened to Meadows.

At the next meeting of the club, Nell took occasion to address the members, inquiring eagerly of them if they were quite sure they

had sensed the magnitude of the event. So intensely earnest, so very enthusiastic did she seem that she was elected chairman on entertainment for the day.

She could hardly wait to tell Ed and Gramma about it. "I can do just as I like about everything," she informed them that evening. "They promised me their full support. I can draw on the club's funds for the dinner and appoint my own committees. And, folks, I'm going to do it up *brown.*" There had always been corpuscles of enthusiasm in Nell Cutter's blood. "Just think!" she went on. "Miss Alice Duffield, the big writer! Why, she lives in *New York.* She goes to *Europe* in the summer. She has just recently been in *Algiers.*" To home-staying Nell the words had a magic sound like the witchery of the Arabian Nights. Home-keeping hearts may be happiest, but quite often they do not realize it. "She's coming on the fourth of March. She'll get in on the afternoon train from Dale City. We're going to have the dinner at six-thirty, and she will lecture after-

ward. I've the women all placed in my mind right now, just where they'll fit in the best. I'm going to ask Mrs. Ramsey to meet her and take her home. Mrs. William Johnson has the nicest house now but she probably doesn't know where Algiers *is*."

"Lizzie Horner is the one who knew her best in the old days," Gramma suggested mildly, "when she was Lizzie Peters, out in the Willow Creek district."

"Lizzie!" Nell's tone voiced the incongruity of the implication. "Lizzie is the best-hearted soul in town and she works like a horse; but you know Lizzie! She can smash more rules of the King's English in fifteen minutes than anybody else I know. Imagine her talking to Miss Duffield, with her 'I seen' and 'I have went.' But Mrs. Ramsey is the best-read woman in town. She reads Shaw and Ibsen and Wells. She's seen cubist pictures and a Russian ballet. She knows who Nietzsche is and she can discuss Freud. Yes, Mrs. Ramsey is the one. *She* can talk Alice Duffield's kind of language."

So Lizzie Horner was put on the kitchen committee, where she belonged and where she felt no pangs of sensitiveness. To the kitchen born was Lizzie. For it was quite true: Lizzie had not kept up with the procession. She had been so busy raising seven boys and girls that she had had little time for wordy theories and intricate philosophies, so busy practicing what some of the other women preached that it was only recently she had joined the club. Good, motherly Lizzie! But poor Lizzie . . . not to know that the time would come when the boys and girls could scarce hide the embarrassment they felt at hearing those flagrant mistakes.

In the days that followed, Nell threw her whole soul into preparations for the big event. The thing must move with the precision of machinery she determined, but silver-trimmed, mahogany-wheeled machinery in which there would be no rattle. "Ed," she would say, "I just can't bear to have her think we are backwoodsy. That's the most galling thing about living in a little town. All our modern authors have just two types of people in their small-

town writings: the discontented kind, or the dull, stolid kind who are too dumb to know enough to *be* discontented. I'm not either one —and there are a lot of us—and I'd like to have Miss Duffield know it. We're not all dowdy and we're not all crude, and I'm going to do my best to have Meadows appear so sophisticated that she will get her eyes opened to what some of the small Mid-West towns are like now."

So, in the enthusiasm of her high purpose, Nell called the Meadows ladies together. The first Gibraltar-like obstacle she ran against was the argument over the place of holding the dinner. No home was large enough. When she spoke pleasantly of holding it in the dining room of one church the tried and true members of the other churches were suddenly stirred to unrighteous irritation. When she tactfully switched it to another house of worship the first ones threatened to withdraw their support. One not-to-be-ignored faction did not believe in having it in a church at all—such a purely secular and social affair. For a

week the mere matter of place hung the whole thing up. When she was almost worn out by their childish bickerings it was finally arranged to have it in the G. A. R. Hall, which more recently had been turned over to the Legion, thereby appeasing all the warlike tribes of the followers of the Gentle One.

When peace, like a river, attended their way once more, the club settled down to make further plans. Nell, herself, was to welcome Miss Duffield in an after-dinner speech. She protested, but the whole club quite surprisingly raised its voice in unanimity. Only Mrs. Ramsey looked as though there was one other who could have done it better. Over the dinner itself there was enough discussion to have filled a book the size of the classic which Mr. Webster wrote.

"For one thing, we want a French *entrée,*" Nell insisted.

"My stars!" Lizzie Horner put in, "I sh'd think you'd have to carry everything on a tray." At which Mrs. Ramsey sent Nell a look conveying its message of scorn.

More than once Lizzie gave herself away. To Minnie Raymond's suggestion that they have a fruit cocktail, she said, "Good land! Ain't them things wicked?"

It was eventually decided. The courses were to be seven in number: a French *entrée*, soup, fish, meat, salad, dessert, coffee-and-speeches. It would be a stupendous task. Besides the large table for the guest of honor, the officers of the club, and their husbands, there were to be many small tables.

"We'll need sixteen, I should say," some one said.

Nell, counting on her fingers the silver that would be needed at each place, made a hasty calculation: "As near as I can figure out, it'll take eight hundred and forty-eight pieces of flat silver."

"Mercy!" It was Charlotte Gray-Cooper. "It sounds like the figures when they advertise one of the big films . . . as though we were putting on 'The Fall of Babylon,' or 'The Burning of Rome.' "

Because the dinner was to be so perfect, so

absolutely correct in every detail, they decided to ignore their own merchants, who carried only small-town staples, and get everything in Dale City. Nell's conscience, tapping with insistent finger to remind her that it was Lizzie Horner who had known Miss Duffield best, caused her to ask Lizzie's company to Dale City on the purchasing trip. Lizzie was as pleased as a child. Her two hundred pounds almost quivered with excitement. "I ain't been to Dale City since three year ago last fall," she told Nell.

So Lizzie Horner, in her best black serge and a hat which bore, impartially, feathers, wings, ribbons, and flowers, with a big jet buckle for good measure, accompanied Nell to Dale City. On the train she grew voluble:

"It does beat all how things in this world get turned around. My father owned the general store out Willow Creek way and Allie's father worked for him. We didn't feel above Allie . . . not just that . . . because we was all new out here together . . . but we felt sorry for her. Allie's had more'n one dress

of mine made over for her, but you can bet she won't be able to remember that. If I had the nerve to do it, when she comes blowin' in here so uppish, I'd rub it in to her. Here's me darnin' and patchin' and there's Allie with money from her books and her lectures and her stage plays and her movie shows . . . *loyalties* they call 'em. Once I remember when the minister come, her 'n' I was in our bare feet and we felt ashamed, we was so big, so we set down on our feet and he stayed and stayed, and we had to set and set. I don't suppose girls nowadays with their rolled socks would bat an eye at a little thing like that, but we was plumb flabbergasted. We had a big laugh, but I can tell you this: *I* had a good stout pair o' shoes at home and was barefooted because I wanted to be, but Allie was barefooted because she *had* to be. And now Allie's known all over Christendom, and only two or three folks as far away as Dale City know I'm livin'. I've saw the time Allie Duffield was glad enough to eat johnnycake and mush and molasses. And now here's us

women tearin' our shirts to get reddishes for her in March. I never eat a reddish in March in my life."

Arrived at Dale City the two went immediately to order the things. Nell reveled in the big stores. With lavish hand, backed by the club funds, she ordered violets and orchids for the tables, lavender silk candle shades, delicate patty shells, a specially prepared dressing from the Schmidt and Mills chef, choice fish, that luxury to the small inland town, little cakes with lavender icing and candied violets, ice cream in elaborate molds, edibles for the whole seven courses. Meadows had never seen so perfect a dinner.

In the next two weeks Nell's own home ran along haphazardly, so intent was she on working for the Day of Days. Over and over she wrote her speech. It must show Miss Duffield that there was intelligence of a high grade in small towns. It commenced with the quotation: "Ever since the day when some cave man, meeting strange adventure, returned home to tell the first piece of fiction. . . ."

Ed, of course, was to attend the dinner. Gramma was going to stay at home with the baby. Josephine was to help serve. Only Craig and Nick were superfluous beings. When it comes to refined society events the average little American boy is excess baggage.

It came . . . March the fourth, dawning bright and sunny after a night of pouring, blinding rain. What mattered it that unassuming men had become famous presidents, that brilliant inaugural balls had been given on that date? They carried with them not half the cyclonic disturbance which agitated Meadows.

The hall was ready, transformed by screens against the old gray-white walls. The tables, immaculate in hand-worked linen, bore their gleaming silver. Cut-glass vases stood ready for the hothouse flowers. Candles in their holders, awaiting the soft lavender shades, soon would shine o'er fair women and brave men. Josephine and nine other club daughters, after much intensive training, were letter-perfect

in the knowledge of procedure through the winding labyrinth of the courses. They were to wear little lace aprons tied with lavender ribbons. If it had been possible, Nell Cutter would have had lavender bread and purple coffee.

In the whole tasteful vision the only discordant note was the noisy jostling about the open door of Craig and Nick Cutter, to say nothing of various and sundry Horners, incongruous in their blue shirts, overalls, and mud-caked shoes. Several times Nell disgustedly shooed them out, but they came back repeatedly like so many blue-jays to a cherry tree.

As she surveyed the tables waiting their finishing touches from Dale City, an icy thought struck her. She voiced it weakly to the women: "After all this work, what if she wouldn't come?"

Lizzie Horner had an answer: "We'd just have our kids come in and set 'em down and feed 'em all them imported vittles."

Craig and Nick, from the safe vantage

point of the transom, sent up the pious prayer: "Oh, Lord, make her not come."

But she came. Mrs. Ramsey and Charlotte Gray-Cooper went to meet her. Simultaneously, as the two advanced upon the passenger coach, Minnie Raymond and Mrs. Parkham met the baggage car. It was as though the two committees represented the literary and commissary departments, the artistic and practical, the Marys and Marthas of the club. Yes, Nell had certainly placed the right women in the right place.

As the author came down the steps to be greeted effusively, the food committee was advising Pete Burrows to get his baggage truck up closer to the express car. "There'll be a stack of things. There won't be a minute to lose. You whisk the things to the dray faster than you've ever done anything in your life."

But Pete did not whisk the things. The baggage man threw off the mail sack, some empty chicken crates, a box of seed potatoes, and then leaned wearily against the opened door. Minnie almost clutched his feet as she

demanded the packages. He looked languidly around the car. "No, ma'am . . . nothing doing."

The two women glared crazily at each other. *The things had not come!*

In the days when the gods sent messages of peace they employed the services of Mercury, but when the message was one of discord they sent Eris on the dubious mission. Never was Eris so well personified as in Minnie Raymond and Mrs. Parkham returning to the hall. Guiltily, as though they had eaten the things themselves, they entered the building where were gathered Meadows' beauty to prepare the dinner and Meadows' chivalry to bring in extra chairs. They blurted out the bad news. It was not a thing one could break gently.

If a molten wave of lava had at that moment rolled, Pompeian-like, over Meadows, centuries later archeologists would have uncovered the hall to find a group of open-mouthed ossified figures: Lizzie in the act of putting coal in the range, Ed Cutter with two chairs

poised in mid-air, every one showing suspended motion.

"Didn't come!" some one breathed half audibly. It was too incredible. It verged on the unthinkable. Ed Cutter broke the spell, flippantly, as one who had not sensed the outrage: " 'We are lost,' the captain shouted, as he staggered down the stairs!' "

Nell turned on him. "Ed Cutter, you carry this thing clear through to the Supreme Court."

Vindictively she had a swift vision of a great mob of people behind iron bars: officers of the express company, clerks, florists, Messrs. Schmidt and Mills themselves.

Roads, since last night, were impassable. The next train would come at ten at night. "There's your small town for you!" Nell was bitter. "*Now* Miss Duffield *can* laugh."

There were a dozen bad, confused, horrible moments. Then, "I give up," Nell admitted. "Just three hours left and absolutely *nothing* to give her. I'm terribly sorry, but somebody else must take charge."

"Oh, come now!" It was Lizzie. She had come in from the kitchen, the freckles on her big face alternating with drops of perspiration. "Don't you dare say Meadows hasn't got nothing to eat. I can get up a good supper in half the time that's left."

"Go ahead, Lizzie. I can't think straight. I resign to you."

"Well, let's go right at it like we was getting up a good old church supper: chicken and noodles, hot sody biscuits and mashed potatoes. There ain't time left for baked beans, but we can have cabbage-slaw and apple pie. And I got beet pickles 'n' watermelon pickles 'n' cucumber pickles 'n' tomato pickles 'n' peach pickles 'n'—"

A wave of mental nausea passed over Nell.

"Very well,' she said grudgingly.

"We'll just put it all on together," the new general ordered, "except the apple pie; that'll give the waitress-girls something to do. If Pete'll open the ice house for us we could whack up some homemade ice cream. Let's take the little tables out and ditch 'em in the

back entry, and go get the long church tables and put 'em in a square. All that silver looks silly for my kind of supper."

"Don't be a piker," Nell urged herself. Mechanically she did what she was told, but her heart was sore within her. Nothing was going as it had been planned—nothing but her speech, which luckily remained intact.

As it neared the dinner hour she slipped up home to dress. When she returned she paused in the main room to survey the tables. Yes, they had the typical old church-supper appearance. Down the center where the hothouse flowers should have been, green crêpe paper around their fat sides, marched a row of potted geraniums, those plebeians among flowers. From the kitchen came the odor of stewing chicken. Village flowers! Village fowls! Common everyday things! Miss Duffield would laugh in her sleeve. Probably they would recognize the homely setting in her next book . . . the same old small-town stuff so popular with modern writers. Oh, she was ashamed of Meadows, ashamed of the giggling

boys in the back doorway, ashamed of fat Lizzie and her farm-hand supper, ashamed of these women getting out their fifty-seven varieties of pickles. Well, *she* wasn't like them.

The time had arrived. Miss Duffield came in. Nell went forward to meet a tall, willowy woman, pleasant-faced and gracious, who wore a simple navy-blue silk dress with white frilled fichu and cuffs. Others came up to greet her. But things did not seem to be going just right. There was a noticeable stiffness among the Meadows people, usually so hospitable.

Then Nell saw Lizzie coming out of the kitchen. Her face was mottled from the heat of the range. She wore a white dress edged with narrow lace. The lace had curled up into little moist rolls around the three necks which she possessed. She was taking off her apron as she came, waddling, ducklike.

"If she only doesn't say 'have saw'!" Nell quaked inwardly. "This," she said brightly, as one whose cheerfulness may cover an unpleasant moment, "is Mrs. Horner."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Duffield."

Lizzie's shyness struggled with the natural warmth of her heart.

Miss Duffield, who had been to Europe more often than Lizzie Horner had been to Dale City, looked into the brown eyes. The others could not know, but immediately she saw a girl crouching above her on a willow-grown bank and lifting her out of a horrible smothering nightmare of water. "It isn't—?" She paused, searchingly. And when complete recognition came—*"Lizzie!"* She put her hands on the huge shoulders and gave them a shake, but inasmuch as Lizzie's body was patterned after the architecture of Grant's Tomb, the playful shaking did not budge her. "Don't you 'Miss-Duffield' me, Lizzie Peters." She kissed Lizzie's wide red cheek. "Shame on you!" Both were laughing. Every one stood about listening. "Oh, Lizzie, do you remember the day you and I sat on our bare feet when the minister came? And the day you loaned me your blue plaid gingham dress to speak in? We sewed white braid and little red buttons on it so no one would recognize it.

I looked like the flag." The two might have been alone. "And the time we sat on the creek bank and I confided to you that I was going to write the most beautiful stories in the world?"

She smiled wryly, a smile that was half a tear: "Well, I haven't. . . . I found there were limitations. But, Lizzie, that little girl comes sometimes and looks over my shoulder at my work and asks me if I've kept the faith. . . . Can you go out there to Willow Creek with me to-morrow? Will the roads be so we can go? I'd rather you'd go with me, Lizzie, than any one I know. Tell me—is the old schoolhouse still there? No . . . of course, it wouldn't be. But the creek's there, isn't it, sweet and cool? . . . And the hills?" She broke off to ask: "You're married, of course. And have you children?"

"Oh, the most outlandish crowd of 'em—seven husky boys and girls."

"Seven boys and girls! I might have known," she laughed gayly. "You always had nicer things than I."

Suddenly Alice Duffield thought of the waiting dinner and made her apology. "Can you sit by me, Lizzie?" And to Lizzie's "My gracious, no. I got to 'tend to the kitchen," she answered, "All right, but I'm coming to stay with you to-night. I don't care whether you have room for me or not. And to-morrow I want you to make me an old-fashioned johnny-cake all yellow and crumbly."

Lizzie hurried lumberingly out to the kitchen to dish up indelicately huge helpings of noodles. "Lord o' love!" The tears mingled with the perspiration. "And I thought she would be a snob by now."

To Nell Cutter the whole atmosphere of the affair had changed. She felt subdued, chastened. As they took their places at the table she glanced across at Miss Duffield, deep in reminiscences with Ed and Will Raymond. Groping for her speech which was to come so soon she found that it seemed out of place, inadequate. Possibly it was intelligent, but it had no heart. It might verge on the intellectual, but it lacked a soul. After all, what

were the fundamentally big things of life, the things that were eternal? Knowledge . . . appearances . . . sophistication? Or truth . . . friendship . . . love?

The home-grown dinner was over. Nell arose. She scarcely knew what she was going to say. Quite plainly, though, she realized that she was not going to refer to the primitive man who had so obligingly returned home to tell the first piece of fiction. She welcomed Miss Duffield as she would have welcomed her to her own home with hospitable graciousness. "We have no key to the city to offer you," she finished, "but from our hearts we give you the key that unlocks the memory of your girlhood days—that rosemary of remembrance."

Miss Duffield did not rise. With misty eyes she gave a simple "thank you" to Nell, and then said: "If you really want to hear about my work and travels I'll be glad to tell you, but just let me sit still and talk to you as though we were a big family. That's what it seems to me—coming home to the family. You know I am that more pathetic person than

a man without a country, a woman without a home."

She spoke of her travels. She gave some intimate glimpses of other writers, big names that struck awe to her listeners. She mentioned some of her own plans and purposes. Then she said: "And now I want to tell you something about yourselves, but you must promise me it won't be published. I mustn't be quoted, Will Raymond."

The editor of the Meadows *Mirror* threw up his hands in token of surrender. Miss Duffield leaned forward and said confidentially: "So many places where I have been entertained I have sensed an atmosphere of unnaturalness, a straining after effect which bordered on artificiality. As Americans, we seem inclined to do that sort of thing—cater to something out of our own environment. Meadows aping Dale City, and Dale City aping Chicago, and Chicago aping New York. But here you seem to be living your own pleasant lives quite naturally."

(Nell Cutter took a drink of water.)

"And another thing I am rejoiced to see . . . the lovely broad way in which the members of all the churches are working together now. When I was a little girl there used to be the most petty quarrels among them. I can see that has all blown away in the larger vision. You have come to feel that it makes so little difference how you worship . . . whether you sit or stand, whether you have kneeling boards or pews with end gates, whether you worship in a building, or in the forest, or in the good deeds you do your fellowmen.

. . . *"The ways, they are many and wide,*
And seldom are two ways the same. Side by side
May we stand at the same little door when all's done.
The ways . . . they are many. The end . . . it is one."

The Episcopal toe of Charlotte Gray-Cooper punched the Methodist one of Minnie Raymond. There were surreptitious glances

across the table. Ed Cutter winked openly at Doc Rhodes. Only Mrs. Ramsey, who did not attend any church but remained at home in aloof holiness and read all of the new thought creeds, smiled in superiority.

It was when the tables were being cleared that Alice Duffield looked toward the outer door, where a tangled bunch of blue shirts, overalls, and mud-caked shoes filled the aperture. "Isn't that the typical youngster the world over?" she laughed. "I've seen those very same boys in every country and city I've ever been in. Can't they come on in and have a bite?"

"Sure!" It was big-hearted Lizzie. "There's loads of stuff left."

The whole thing was over. The social event which was to have proved Meadows' sophistication had ended. They were all leaving, the chattering crowd of common. ordinary men and women who to-morrow—and other morrows—would arise in the early dawn cheerfully to take up the day's burdens.

"Ain't it been nice?" Lizzie wanted to know.

"It seems to me it's been the nicest social gathering in Meadows I have ever saw."

Nell Cutter did not even wince. *"Hasn't it?"* she said sincerely.

CHAPTER IX

EASY MONEY

THE exchequer of the Cutter household was low in the coin of the realm all that spring. Financial depression, that aftermath of a war-wracked world, spread like the circling ripples of a wave to the most remote little houses on the outskirts of the tiniest villages in the last country to enter the conflict.

One of the undulations struck the Cutter home. Money was tight, tighter than the bark on a tree. Ed had plenty of law work but pay was slow. In the settlement of more than one estate he had found that he would be compelled to wait for the selling of the land before he could collect his fees. And land was not moving. So he had taken interest-bearing notes, and even a town lot or two in payment. But a family of growing youngsters cannot eat notes nor have their clothes made out of town lots.

"Keep the family expenses down to bedrock," Ed prescribed. "We can do without a

lot of things if we make up our minds to it. If we can just manage to live on our actual cash we'll have a substantial sum coming to us when the depression is over."

So Nell turned her blue silk, made Craig and Nick some shirts out of Ed's, and sewed rags for a rug. Ed conducted himself with equal nobility of soul, having his old suit cleaned, his hat blocked, and his shoes resoled.

For a long time Nell treated this extra stringency as though it were a joke. A warm little feeling of success possessed her at her accomplishments. "You'd never guess that I made the baby's rompers out of an old white dress," she would report to her liege lord. Or, "Would you dream Josephine's apron was made from that old dress shirt of yours?"

"That's good!" Ed would commend. "It's what the whole country needs . . . to get back to first principles. If we'd all live like the pioneers for awhile the whole nation would pull out gloriously."

But it is hard for a family in a comfortable house with modern conveniences to imagine

it is living in a log cabin or a sod shanty. As time went on there grew demands for many things for which the average pioneer had no need: tennis shoes . . . a basket ball . . . piano lessons . . . silk stockings. . . . The requirements of a family of six are as the sands of the sea.

All of March Nell cheerfully kept up her thrifty administration. But when April came and the warm weather made inroads upon her strength, her interest in the economy game waned perceptibly. And then, on a warm, moist day in that month, she went to Dale City shopping with Mrs. Ramsey—and economy was no longer a joke.

Going shopping with a wealthier friend is the sunken reef on which many a woman has steered her financial bark, watched it spring a leak, founder and go down. Nell made a genuine business of her shopping. She whisked around breathlessly among the stores with special partiality to basements; pricing, comparing, planning, matching. By the time she met Mrs. Ramsey at the designated tea room, she

was hot and tired. The childless Mrs. Ramsey, cool and unperturbed, had purchased two gowns, a hat, gloves, and some dainty lingerie under the same expensive roof. Of Nell's exhaustion, she said complacently: "I won't take all that trouble running around for anybody. If you count your time, you've spent a great deal more than you think."

It was true, thought Nell in discouragement. Well, things would be different if she had an income of her own like Mrs. Ramsey. Mrs. Ramsey had often referred to that income, giving the impression that it was inherited from a noble ancestor. Nell Cutter had no income of her own from any source, aristocratic or plebeian. "What's mine is yours!" Ed had said once in a dim and distant past. And Nell had taken him at his word, using the checking account as she had seen fit. If she and the checking account were on stiff and unfriendly terms at present, there were the exigencies of the times to blame.

After that tiresome shopping trip, she felt a wild desire to throw economy to the winds

and launch out on a regular buying spree. So many things in the house needed replenishing, from the bent pancake turner to the old living-room furniture. And that personal income of Mrs. Ramsey's stuck like a bone in her throat. If she herself only had one which would bear no relation to the family treasury! So, having initiative and energy, those two fruitful partners, she cast about to find a way of making an income of her own. Surely there was something she could do within the four walls of her home that would make her famous. With fame came wealth. What was it that somebody . . . Emerson maybe . . . had said about the public making a pathway to you even though you built your hut in a forest? Figuratively bound by a thousand strands in the heart of the forest, what could she, a mother and housekeeper, do to cause the pathway to become a reality? Mrs. Ramsey had a creed which she studied zealously, quoted fluently, lived religiously; that whatever you *willed* to do, you *could* do. Very well, she, Nell Cutter, of the town of Meadows, *willed* to make a large

sum of money in the next few weeks right under her own roof!

She went at it clear-headedly, systematically. What had other people done? Written fiction for one thing. Many a famous writer had begun that way. She had read of one who learned to run a typewriter with her baby in her lap. "Only if it had been my baby," thought Nell, "he'd have been on the typewriter." Yes, she would write stories. It was easy work and the pay was good. With a warm little feeling of elation over her decision she visioned the future headlines in a magazine: THE SOUL OF SARAH, BY NELL CUTTER.

She could scarcely wait to get the housework done. When the last dish towel was hung up she took a bath and put on clean clothes, approaching the altar of the Muse without stain or blemish, as it were. She wrote her title and waited a few minutes for Inspiration—that mysterious and invisible litterateur who is supposed to write stories and poems so freely for all its devotees—to come to her aid.

It was very slow in answering her summons. In fact, it did not come at all. She sat looking out into the yard where a soft little afternoon breeze whispered of coming lilacs and plum blossoms. The soul of Sarah waited as patiently as did the mind of Nell Cutter.

After several attempts, she grew impatient. Without waiting longer for the sluggish Muse, she wrote her first pages. When they were finished she felt as tired as though she had done the family washing.

For several days she worked secretly on her masterpiece. At the end of that time she read it to Ed. "Ed, don't you think it's pretty good?"

"*Pretty* good," Ed said cheerfully. And Nell did not speak to him for an hour.

She sent the story to a magazine. Like a fluttering dove, and not entirely leafless, it came back to its haven. A letter accompanied it: "We regret to tell you that this is not a story at all. It is a series of anecdotes. However it is written in a way which makes us feel that you might be able to do something if you

would go into the technical construction of story work."

"Technical!" she said in amazement to Ed. "Whoever dreamed that there was any technical construction to a story. I thought when popular writers wrote they just sat down and *wrote*. It looks so easy, as though it just rolled off their pens."

"Well, a brief for the Supreme Court reads as though it just rolled out of your brain," was Ed's dry comment. "But I've noticed it took weeks of digging before it was ready to roll."

If it took actual skill before one could dash off a story, there was another opening less arduous: photoplay work. Some people said you didn't even have to have an education to do it. Of course if you had one you couldn't just shed it like a toad's skin. Action was all that was needed in a photoplay. And once an amateur received ten thousand dollars for a scenario!

So, hope springing eternal, Nell proceeded to steal moments from the housework to construct a play that would move. It moved all

right. There was as much action in it as a skiing party. With all the agility of a mountain goat it jumped from the crag of one situation to another. With less originality than poetic fervor, although somewhat dubious over the length of the title in electric signs, she called it "Across the Sands o' Dee." To which a facetious photoplay editor made leisurely but pointed reply: "Across the Sands o' Dee isn't good enough to get across." It was horribly trying . . . this attempt to become famous. Preaching better sermons or making better mousetraps in the forest is slow and tedious business.

Nell turned to Gramma for comfort. "Why couldn't either of those things of mine have been successful when I wanted the money so badly?"

Gramma's philosophy was generally as sound as it was old-fashioned. "I have a notion, Nellie, that people who do those things successfully don't do them with their minds altogether on the money."

Two of the ways of earning money now

seemed gone. But Nell's determination was not. In the next few days she scanned the magazines for prize lists, and in consequence composed the words of a song, wrote a limerick for a razor, a slogan for a newly-developed town, and a set of verses about face powder. With each successive failure she became more determined to do something which would bring her in cold, hard cash.

And then . . . she picked up a newspaper and saw Opportunity not only beckoning to her, but waving its arms wildly. There was a picture of a heterogeneous collection of objects, and people doing ridiculous things. The announcement said that the person naming the largest number of objects which began with the letter "P" would receive the modest sum of one thousand dollars, the one next highest five hundred, and in gradually diminishing ratio, a lone dollar. One had to buy a little furniture polish—Packer's Priceless Polish—but that was a mere bagatelle.

Nell stood looking at the picture. There were a dozen objects at first glance: *peaches,*

pears, a priest, a papoose. The whole thing was as plain as daylight. She called the children and showed them.

"Pooh! I can see something that don't begin with 'P'." Craig was skeptical. "That snake stickin' out its tongue at the man that's sweatin'."

"Don't you see, Craig? It's *python* and *perspiration.*" The more she looked at it the more there was in it. From a casual half-interest she began to write down the words. For a while she did it in her bedroom, slyly, dreading Ed's laughter. But one cannot cut one's self off from a family for any great length of time, so it was not long until she had come out in the open.

"Do you suppose it's a reliable firm?" she wanted to know.

"Sure, it's reliable," Ed affirmed. "And a perfectly legitimate way of advertising."

"But how can they afford to give away several thousand dollars just for prizes like this?"

"Oh, I guess they can afford it all right when sixty-five thousand women will buy polish.

Men don't go in for that sort of thing. It's the women who always bite."

There was a list of people who had won prizes from the same company once before. Nell picked out a name at random and wrote. The answer was as satisfactory as it was brief and illiterate. "You bet I got the money it shure come in handy. Maria Toombs."

That settled it. A thousand dollars would look as good to Nell as it had to Maria. She shut her eyes and let her mind soar away on a magic carpet to the land of her heart's desire. She would get Ed a new suit, Craig a cornet, Nicky a trombone, the baby a lovely new swing, Gramma a silk dress and Josephine a dressing table. For herself she could think of nothing more enjoyable than to heave the stocking bag and its entire contents into the furnace, and buy new ones all round. She bought five dollars worth of polish—ten bottles. The whole family surveyed them standing in a shining, cherry-colored row.

"It seems an awful lot," Josephine murmured.

"Let's try it on lettuce," Ed suggested, "or maybe it would lubricate the car."

"No, the boys can sell it," Nell settled the discussion. "Only I wouldn't want a soul in town to know it was my doing. I'll not send them around with it until June the first, the day the prizes are awarded."

From a half-careless way of picking out the words, Nell soon settled down into superseriousness concerning it. She commenced a systematic reading of the dictionary. Any one who has taken this course of light reading knows that there are one hundred and eighty-nine pages of exceedingly fine print devoted to the letter "P." Slowly she read down the columns following a careful forefinger.

Day after day she pored over Mr. Webster's best seller. Her eyes took on a glassy stare as she went about thinking of the words. She greeted Ed upon his return from the office with: "Ed, I know what that thing is that looks like a bone on the end of a rope. It's a *pogamoggan.*" Or "Ed, did you know your thumb was a *pollex?*" On a stormy evening she

greeted her rain-soaked spouse, not with words of concern, but with: "Ed, I found a lot of new ones to-day: *puffs* in that woman's hair, *pimples* on the man's face, and that wheel is a *pinion.*" She woke in the night. "The top of that building is a *pinnacle,*" she suddenly thought, and got out of bed to write it down. Where she used to give Ed a cheery "good-morning," she now said, "*Picket,* Ed—that fence is a *picket.* Why didn't I have the wit to think of it before?"

Ed was gone a great deal evenings. Time was when Nell would have asked for and been concerned over the cause, but now she gave it scarcely a thought. She neglected her neighbors even while vaguely wondering why none of them came in to see her. She was intensely interested, vitally engrossed. The picture puzzle became an obsession with her. Beside the number of objects in the Packer Polish Prize Picture, all other work was mechanical, unmeaning. "Children, clear the table," she would say. "It's your turn, Nicky. Mother wants to get right to work on the puzzle. *Don't*

sit there! Ed, look at him just sitting there!"

To which Ed would respond blithely:

"The prize is a thousand plunks,
And the least but one.
But the light of the whole day dies
With a sitting son."

Nell would pay no attention to his jocoseness. She would be deep in the pursuit of the elusive "P."

As time went on, whenever she ran up town on errands, she saw things with the eye of the hunter after his prey. Objects stood out of the landscape as though scarlet-hued: *porches, posts, people, pigeons.* Unconsciously she began cooking things which came in the list: *prunes, pancakes,* and, though the family en masse cordially detested the dish, *parsnips.*

The children took it like a disease. It was as though, lacking vaccination, the scourge swept through the family. Craig rushed in wildly with: "Mama, where are you? Our teacher said *piet* was another name for magpie. There's a *piet* in the picture." Even

Nicky with the blood trickling gruesomely from a cut foot, had presence of mind to sob: "I did it on the *pitchfork*. Have you got *p-pitchfork* on your list?" Only Ed remained unscathed, inoculated, germ-proof.

On the whole the family suffered from the intrusion of the puzzle. Gastronomically speaking, they led a scrambled-egg existence. There was a hasty slant on the appearance of the rooms. But even while wholly cognizant, half ashamed of the loose flying ends, Nell sensed a glamor over the little house. June the first!

The list was finished. Not a foreign verb nor an alien adjective intruded itself. "Ed, I have two hundred and fifty-six objects. I've read the dictionary twice. There isn't a mistake. From '*pa*' to '*pyæsis.*' I have every one. I'll get the thousand."

Nell herself took the neat manuscript to the office. She clung to it a moment in farewell as one would part from a near relative. When she returned home she felt lost, as though a long-entertained guest had departed. As the

days went by she found to her surprise that she could not get back into the harness. "I'm not sick," she told Gramma, "just all in."

June the first came, both glamorous and portenteous. The prize announcement might be telegraphed. In that case the agent would call her on the phone. If not telegraphed, the late afternoon train would bring a letter.

After dinner she grew too nervous for words. At one-fifty the phone rang. It was not a telegram. It was Mrs. Ramsey. She told Nell that she was spending her afternoon *willing* to accomplish certain ends. It made Nell think of the prize. So she went into her bedroom and lay down to will with all the strength of her mentality that the money would be hers. But her mind would not answer the summons. She tried to command herself sternly. Out of the window she could see *pines, poplars,* her *pullets,* a *puddle, Pete* Burrows. They projected themselves like the bas-relief figures on an ancient tomb. She wished the letter "P" could be dropped from the alphabet.

By four-thirty there had been no telegram. It would come by mail then. For a time she contemplated sending up to the office for her mail but decided she would rather have Ed bring the letter. At five she heard him drive in. Her cheeks were hot. Little shivers were using her vertebræ for a stepladder. Ed came in, smiling, with a letter in his hand. Simultaneously she saw Pete Burrows coming up the street in the dray. With swift mental questioning she wondered if they would send a thousand dollars by freight.

The letter was from Mr. Packer *et al.* Trembling, she opened it. She read it aloud: "While your answer did not win one of the cash prizes, it comes in the list of honorable mention. To these we are sending, with our compliments, twenty bottles of our excellent furniture polish."

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" roared Ed raucously.

Nell turned and swept from the room. By the front door she paused, for the boys and Pete Burrows were coming up the walk. The boys looked hot and tired with their khaki

bags slung across their shoulders. Solicitous, she met them, asking what luck they had had with their sales.

They were not enthusiastic. "How'd you expect us to sell your old polish?" Craig growled.

"Why not?"

"Aw! Most all the kids in town are sellin' it, too. Red 'n Tug Lewis 'n Heinie Christianson. We met in the park. Altogether we had fifty-six bottles."

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" Mephistopheles reincarnated in the person of Ed Cutter again let out his diabolical laughter. "There aren't enough families in Meadows to use the polish. Couldn't we get some more to move in . . . a bottle of polish . . . or maybe two . . . given with every town lot?"

"All their mothers tried that old puzzle," Nick put in, "all but Tug's. She didn't. But, anyway, Tug's got ten bottles. He's sellin' for Mrs. Ramsey."

"Mrs. Ramsey? Did *she* try it? Oh, good land! She *willed* to get the prize." Humor,

so nearly drowned, was responding to the use of Nick's pulmotor of gossip. Pete brought in a box, set down the burden and wiped his forehead.

"Well, Pete!" Ed was hilariously good-natured. "All the women in town tried for that prize, didn't they?"

Pete grinned. "Yessir. And where'll you have yours, Mr. Cutter . . . here or at the office?"

Mr. Cutter's shouting and his tumult died. He looked both stunned and sheepish. "Mine?" he repeated foolishly. He stepped out on the porch behind Pete. A disinterested spectator would have said that he was trying to push Pete out. But Pete had been raised on a ranch and his voice was not gentle.

"Yessir," he replied with emphasis, "there's a box of polish directed to you, too."

"What? Not you, too, Brutus?" Nell began to shake with pent-up mirth.

"Oh, I tried it . . . just for fun." Ed appeared to be clutching at his slipping bravado. "Just after office hours. I thought maybe I'd

beat you . . . thought maybe. . . ." His voice was lost in apologetic mumbling.

Humor, Nell's companion for all the years of her life, completely resuscitated, was sitting up and looking around. Laughter came from her, light-hearted, bubbling, infectious. She reached for her apron. Once more she felt alive, energetic, interested in the housework.

"Oh, Ed, won't it be nice to get back to normal conditions again? To-morrow I'm going to clean this house from front to back. But just now I'm going to cook a good, hot supper for these youngsters. You go right back up town and get some things . . . meat, a vegetable and some fresh fruit."

Ed seemed pleased to get away. "All right. I'll get pork chops, peas and a pineapple."

The two looked at each other for the space of a surprised, solemn moment. Then simultaneously they both laughed. "Don't you dare, Ed Cutter!" Nell articulated feebly. "You bring *beans* and *beef* and *bananas*."

CHAPTER X

THE PRESENT GENERATION

SUMMER vacation was upon the Cutters almost before they were aware of it. And that entire vacation seemed to belong not so much to the members of the family as to Barbara Cutter, their guest. Everything centered about her. She was the axis around which their whole interest revolved.

To say that Barbara Cutter was twenty-four, unmarried, graduate of a mid-western university, and a grade teacher in the Chicago schools, is to say very little. Not a word about her bubbling spirits, her ever-changing moods, her lovable qualities, her illusions and ideals. After all, they are the flesh that clothes and the blood that nourishes. High hopes, deep faith, dreams of desire—who shall relegate them to the background with the things that are but shadows?

Barbara's mother had died several years be-

fore, and her father, who was Ed Cutter's eldest brother, Sam, had remarried. As a consequence, the independent and high-strung Barbara had decided that she was not wanted in the old home that summer. As a matter of fact, her stepmother was a very kind and gracious lady, but with the wilfulness of youth the girl had chosen to look upon her as a tyrant and usurper. So she had written her aunt Nell a characteristic letter:

". . . Can't I spend my summer vacation with you in Meadows? When I tell you that I have taken an inventory of my uncles and aunts, arranged them all in alphabetical order, and out of the long and brilliant list chosen you folks upon whom to bestow the honor of my presence, I know your heart will melt within you. Tell Granny that her being there has eleven-tenths to do with my decision. . . ."

With Ed and Gramma, Nell Cutter had laughed at the gay little note and written her to come along and behave herself.

So Miss Barbara Cutter, in a merry whirl of laughter, alighted from the afternoon train on a day in June and settled down for the long summer.

Immediately the Cutter household took on an added gayety. Ed enjoyed the girl's ready wit. To Nell she seemed the reincarnation of her own younger days. Josephine looked upon her with all the worshipful admiration that a thirteen-year-old has for a real young lady. Craig and Nick, while not deigning to acknowledge that they liked her, grinned at everything she said or did. The baby, always discriminating, ran toddling to her. And Gramma basked in her merriment as the gentle old sometimes bask in the presence of the spirited young.

After supper of that first day, Barbara unpacked her pretty clothes, and along with them she apparently unpacked her Opinions, too. She was full of them: definite, decided Ideas. One was that Ed and Nell were wasting their lives in Meadows.

MONROE AVE. BAPTIST CHURCH

"How can you folks live contentedly here in a narrow, two-by-four, gossipy little burg?" she wanted to know.

Nell was immediately up in arms. To be sure, she had sometimes expressed herself similarly to Ed; but letting an outsider come along and do it for her was a different matter.

"Why, Barbara, even if those things *are* true, they are only half a truth. There's another side to a small town—the friendly, hospitable, unselfish side. If I'd say my mother was a plain woman with a large mouth would that be all there was to say about her? And not everybody here is narrow. Why, *Ed* and *I* aren't," she finished, laughing.

"That's just it, you're not typical small-town folks. Why, you are *Chicago* people." It was as though she presented them with the Croix de Guerre.

Gramma put in mildly, "Barby, you were brought up on a farm yourself."

"That's why I know what I'm talking about, Granny dear. Believe *me,* no more farm or small town for this lady."

On the second evening Dr. William Rhodes dropped into the Cutters', as he had been doing off and on ever since he had bought his dental practice in Meadows. If there are those who imagine that Doctor Rhodes was surprised to find a guest there, they do not yet know the Meadows of the country. There was not a man, woman, or child in town who did not know of the arrival of the Cutters' niece. Even Old Man Mickle, who was deaf, had seen it, and Old Lady O'Niel, who was blind, had heard it. Like the people of Thrums, many of the inhabitants could have told just how she was dressed.

Doctor Rhodes himself, immaculate in his operating gown, had been about to give gas to one of the Baker girls—aged fifty-six—when he had seen Barbara coming up from the station with Ed and Nell in the car. It is a peculiar coincidence that simultaneously with this event the fact occurred to him that it was all foolishness for as young and healthy a fellow as he was to take a vacation.

There followed that first call—and others.

The young dentist and Barbara became as friendly as the rain and the blossoms, or the lark and the sky. The word "friendly" needs explanation. They were friends and they were enemies, genial enemies. It is a dangerous combination. Verbally, they scrapped a great deal. Nothing escaped their heated arguments: politics and pies, religion and rabbits, literature and lobster. International problems and insignificant trifles were all the same to them. Their discussion over the number of toes a flicker possesses was as animated as the one over the armaments of nations.

They rode miles over the country in the man's roadster. And if there had been a taximeter on their conversation it would have registered more miles than the one on the car. On the strength of having known two university girls and a fraternity man in common they began calling each other by their first names.

"How can you stand it here all the year round?" was one of Barbara's frequent questions.

To which Doctor Rhodes would reply, "Seems like a nice little burg to me. Good folks here . . . and my practice is coming along fine."

"But the narrow, gossipy side of it," Barbara would insist. And they would be off again, arguing about that.

As the weeks went on, Barbara shook out and hung on the family line various other dressy Opinions. A particularly chic and up-to-date one was concerning the friendships of men and women. "The old notion that there is usually something sentimental between them is laughable," she told them. "Why, I could be good friends with a single man or an engaged man or a married man."

Gramma was shocked. "Oh, my dear!" she said, distressed; "I wish you wouldn't say things you don't mean."

"But I do mean them, every word."

"Well, you've got a corking good chance to carry out your theories, Barbe," Ed put in, "for Doc Rhodes is going to be married this fall."

"Oh, is he?" For the mere fraction of an eyewink the girl lost her poise.

"Yes," Ed went on serenely. "He rented the old Miller place to-day."

"Oh, did he?"

"He expects to fix it up and furnish it this summer."

"Oh, does he?"

"Ed, why did you blurt that out so?" Nell demanded when they were alone.

Ed was unruffled: "Anybody encased in a manganese-steel, hermetically sealed Theory like hers can't feel any concussion from a jolt."

"You can't tell about a girl." Nell was disturbed. "They've been together so much. . . . I don't like the idea, and I must say it wasn't very nice of him to let somebody else tell her of his coming marriage."

But Barbara herself was apparently unagitated about it. That evening, when Doctor Rhodes dropped in, she said in the most matter-of-fact way before them all: "Well, I've heard the tragic news. What's her name and where's her hame?"

"Maybe I dinna choose to tell," he smiled at the saucy Barbara, and then added seriously enough, "Her name's Margaret Moore and she's from my home town, Detroit. I've known her ever since I was a kid."

"She surely loves you, Bill, to trade Detroit for Meadows," was Barbara's only comment.

"I rented the Miller place, you know." The dentist was a little embarrassed in the midst of his new honors. "Don't you folks want to come over and see it?"

They all trooped along with him: Ed and the baby, Gramma and Josephine, Nell and the boys, the guest and the future bridegroom. Even Tobey, excited almost to the point of hydrophobia, ran in and out and around the procession. Through the grass-grown alley, up the back walk, where mullein stalks pushed through the bricks, and around to the front door of the old-fashioned house went the cavalcade.

"Doesn't look exactly palatial, does it?" the future tenant acknowledged.

"It's pretty bad," Barbara said frankly.

"But if he will do all the things he's promised, you can stand it for a while."

Doctor Rhodes unlocked the front door and they all flocked in. The crowd filled the little sitting room to overflowing. Politely, they all expressed themselves. Ed said that, after all, the old house looked as solid as the day it was built. Gramma thought it would be nice and sunny. Nell found some good points in the kitchen. Josephine liked the cozy side porch. Craig declared the front yard was a peachy place to keep guinea pigs. Nick, with that wonderful foresight so characteristic of eight-year-olds, informed Doctor Rhodes cheerfully that if he ever got any little boys the stair banisters would be a dandy place for them to slide.

Rather hastily the potential parent said, "It'll need a lot of things done, won't it?" He looked around at them all boyishly and helplessly: "I want it all ready down to the last thing."

Barbara dominated the situation, as she always did. "How much can you spend on it?"

she asked briskly. It made Gramma shudder. Even Nell was embarrassed.

"Five hundred dollars," he answered, readily enough; "no more, and it wouldn't make me sore if it could be less. If Old Man Schneiderman would loosen up and part with his last lower right bicuspid and let me make him a plate, I could add a little more."

"Well, it won't go very far." Barbara was appallingly honest. "It'll take a lot of judgment and taste to fix it. You'd better let me engineer the whole thing."

Gramma turned suddenly, and stepping out of the forlorn little house, sat down on the steps. It was flesh of her flesh that was saying those things! What were girls coming to these days?

From that evening Doctor Rhodes took Barbara at her word and made not the ghost of a move until he had consulted her. Together they picked out a big old-fashioned secondhand davenport with a rocker to match, graceful old things with clusters of grapes on the woodwork. Barbara chose the tapestry

with which they were to be reupholstered—a combination of brown, rose and tan.

"If we could only find another chair or two like them," she mourned.

She went into her new work as enthusiastically as she did everything. "She'll want a little sewing table here," Barbara would decide. Or, "She'll like a fern basket there." One would have thought the fiancée's name was "She'll." Every once in a while Doctor Rhodes would read Barbara part of a letter from the girl commending what he was doing. And then he had a new picture of her to show. Barbara studied the face. It was sweet, gentle, placid. "Pretty, but not much spunk," was her only comment as she handed it back.

With the prospective bridegroom she went hither and yon in his roadster to round up stray pieces of furniture. Once when they were driving along the country road she fairly screamed at him, "Stop! Look there!" It was a chair, a dirty chair, sitting dejectedly under a plum tree, a fat old hen squatting lazily on one of the arms. But it had lovely curves in its

decrepit back and grapes festooned its brow. Barbara sprang out, hunted up a stolid matron, and inquired the price of the erstwhile chicken roost.

"I don't know. That chair belong to Gra'pa. He tink lots of that chair," the phlegmatic lady made answer. Finally, to Barbara's insistent demand, she said wearily, "Vell, I ask him; but I don' tink he part with a chair he tink so much of."

Barbara haggled like a peddler and emerged victorious. Unenthusiastically, Doctor Rhodes brushed the feathers off the purchase and carried it gingerly to the car. "I feel like a cad having you do this for me," he apologized.

"Oh, don't worry," was the blithe answer. "I'm not doing it just for you. I like to do such things. . . . 'The joy of the working,' you know, as Kipling says."

So they worked together through the long sunshiny country summer. And quite frequently they scrapped. "Whose house *is* this?" the man would ask. "Yours, thank goodness!" the girl would retort.

Nell held in for a little while, and then she exploded to Ed: "I'm so worried. It ought not to go on like this. Somebody's going to get hurt. It isn't natural."

If Nell was worried, Gramma was scandalized. "There's something about it so different from what girls used to do. Think of her going there to measure for curtains, and up to Dale City with him to buy kitchen utensils."

"Well, Gramma, I don't know what to do. It's the spirit of the present generation, I guess. She certainly seems capable of taking care of herself."

The two, loving her, undertook to advise her. Barbara opened her brown eyes wide. "What are you driving at?"

"It's playing with fire," they warned.

"Oh, for goodness' sakes, why does everything have to be divided into boys and girls, men and women, male and female? It makes me tired! Can't Bill Rhodes and I be just as good friends as he and my brother could? I tell you, folks, things have changed."

"Human nature hasn't changed." Gramma had two pink spots on her delicate old cheeks. "And, besides, you must consider what others say."

"You see? There's your small town for you! Your business is everybody's business."

Nell was provoked into saying, "At least in a little town you have to behave yourself."

"I *am* behaving myself, Aunt Nell, if that's what you mean. I've never said or done a thing when I was with Doctor Rhodes that I wouldn't say or do before you all." It was quite true. One had only to take into consideration the fact that she said and did a great many startling things when they were all present. "And if you are worrying about me," she went on, "I can tell you that maybe I'm going to be married, too. I haven't quite made up my mind about it. His name is Frazier, Franklin B. Frazier, and he's a very wealthy jewelry man. He's a widower with an elegant home on the Lake Shore Drive."

"Do you care for him, Barbara?" It was Gramma, solicitous as ever.

"If you mean do I get palpitation of the heart when I see him coming, I'll say I don't. But if you mean do I think he's a grand meal-ticket, I'll *say* I do."

"Barbara, your mother wouldn't approve of such talk at all."

The girl flushed. "My mother spent the best years of her life helping my father pay for a farm and stock and machinery, and his second wife has just been in California helping him spend the income from them. Don't talk to *me*."

"Your mother would never have traded her young years and her babies for the things your father's new wife is now having. She had your father's first love."

"Love! Oh, Granny dear, what is love? Moonlight and roses. Here to-day and gone to-morrow as the preacher says. But a bank account! To have it or not! That is the question. Whether 'tis nicer to suffer the slings and arrows of an outrageous, small income or take arms against a sea of troubles by hooking up to a bank account. 'Tis a con-

summation devoutly to be wished. But to marry a poor man you may happen to love! To slave . . . to dig . . . to save. . . . Perchance to do your own work. Ay, there's the scrub!"

Abruptly Gramma went into her bedroom and closed the door. But it was characteristic of Barbara that she was as lovable as she was willful. So it was only a few moments later that she tapped on the door and flung herself down by her grandmother. "I shock you terribly, don't I, darling Granny? I'll be good all the rest of the day. I'll sit on a hassock by you—or was a hassock something to eat?—and I'll work on a sampler that says 'Love One Another'."

As long as she had told the folks about him it occurred to Barbara that she might as well tell Doctor Rhodes, too, about Franklin B. Frazier. It seems he, also, was anxious to know about the state of her heart. "Do you love him, Barbara?"

"I'm crazy about him. He's got money to buy Lake Michigan."

"That's the way with you girls." The young dentist was suddenly bitter. "Nothing talks but money. Brains . . . ambition . . . youth . . . everything is discarded when the eagle begins to squawk."

"You've nothing to mourn about," Barbara retorted. "*Your* girl isn't marrying *you* for money."

He winced. "Rub it in! No, thank the Lord, she'll not marry me for that."

"Your sweet and lovable disposition I suppose. . . . Don't drive off the culvert. I may choose to throw my life away, but I don't care to spill it out of a car."

It was the next evening that she reported to him, "Here's a sample of your small town: Those Baker old maids that live next door to you have long necks from watching their neighbors. Their grapevines come up close to your side porch, and twice now when I've been there I've seen one of them slip along the fence and stand in the vines watching me. One of these days I'm going to lose my head and bawl right out, 'Keep your *nose* on your own

side of the fence.' I wouldn't live here for half the town."

"It's fortunate all girls don't see things as narrowly as you do," he said stiffly. "They may not do that stunt on the Lake Shore Drive, but it's a cinch you could die there without a soul raising his finger to help you."

"I'd just as soon die alone as to have a circle of curious folks standing around."

It was a spirited discussion, far more vehement than was necessary, since neither one was being called upon to leave his chosen sphere.

The summer began dropping subtle hints that she was slipping away. She did it by tossing handsful of goldenrod along the countryside, sending a few flurrying leaves across the road, sprinkling the scent of ripening apples on the breeze.

"Bill," the girl asked one evening, "do you realize that in one week I go like the quarry slave at night, scourged to the dungeon of his schoolroom?"

"One week?" It came out quickly, pregnant with dismay. Then the speaker grew

silent, as though appalled at the tone of his own voice.

The week spun by with motorlike rapidity. The adult members of the Cutter household were depressed. Something in the scheme of things had gone wrong.

"Somebody's going to be hurt," Nell mourned to Ed. "A man and two girls! There have been triangles like that ever since Vashti and Esther and the King of Persia. . . . And I've been perfectly helpless to stop it."

"Forget it, Nell," was Ed's consolation. "They're of age, and as far as I can see they ran their own heads into the noose."

Barbara herself seemed as high-spirited as ever. Nell watched her covertly. Was she sincere in her gayety? Or was she merely brave?

The end of the week came swinging into view. The little house was complete in every way. From the diminutive sitting room, which should have been large, to the barnlike kitchen, which should have been small, things were in

their places. Doctor Rhodes, arriving at the Cutters', announced casually to Barbara, in tones that were meant to be jaunty, "They've turned on the juice to-night. Come on over and inspect the mansion by electricity at eighteen cents per kilowatt."

Nell, Ed, Gramma—not one made protest or motion to accompany the two. It was as if they washed their hands of it.

Over to the house the two went and up the front walk, clean-clipped now from overhanging grass. The yard was sweet with the odor of its recent mowing. Barbara chattered gayly on anything that came to her mind, but Doctor Rhodes was silent. Grimly he stalked along by her and glumly he mounted the steps. Just inside the living-room door he touched a button and the little house became a Thing of Light. Discrepancies were hidden in the gleam of the radiance. The sitting room welcomed them with the warmth of a living person. The cheerful dining room seemed to beckon hospitably. The two bedrooms beyond gave glimpses of exquisite daintiness.

Together they turned to the dining room. Neither spoke—the man to whom all this belonged nor the girl who had given it the magic touch—as through the rooms they walked, into the kitchen, and out onto the little side porch. The girl looked back through the open door.

"Looks pretty good, doesn't it? Not half bad for your home, sweet home."

"Barbe," the man said, hurriedly, earnestly, "I've something to tell you. I've got to have it out with you to-night. I don't know how you are going to take it . . . just now it seems a horrible thing I've done. There isn't any girl . . . any other girl but you. You see, I read a story once like that: A fellow got a girl to help him fix up a house and she got interested in it and got to caring for the fellow. I thought I'd risk it, too." He was restless, worried, ill at ease. "I wrote my mother about you, and she wrote back to go ahead with the house, and if I couldn't get the girl, *she'd* come on here. Margaret Moore was her maiden name."

He paused as though to let the enormity of the thing sink in, and then he went on:

"There've been lots of times when, in spite of that Chicago old duffer, I've thought you cared . . . and plenty more when I thought you didn't. Just now the whole thing seems so nervy and deceptive that I stand to lose your friendship, too . . . although I can't say that I care such a darned lot for just your friendship—" He turned toward her with an air of telling the worst and getting it over. "Barbe, the girl in the story was so surprised when the fellow told her . . . and she cried all over him. . . . You don't feel that way, do you, Barbe?"

Miss Barbara Cutter, the irrepressible, threw back her head and let forth a laugh, gay and bubbling. "Not the slightest, Bill! Neither like weeping on you, nor even registering surprise."

"What d'you mean . . . not surprised?"

"Nothing, except that I've known it all the time."

"The dickens you have! How?"

"Well, in the first place I noticed you didn't act real crazy about your Maggie. Then in one of your books I saw: 'William Rhodes, from his mother, Margaret Moore Rhodes.' After that I nearly laughed in your face when you showed me that picture and I recognized a third-rate movie actress, who no doubt sells her photos for a quarter. And, besides, Bill, *I'd read that same story, too.*"

The man, nerve-taut, intent on following one clew, gave the girl's shoulders a little shake. "If you knew . . . why did you keep on helping?"

Barbara raised mischievous eyes. But quite suddenly the mischief in them melted into something finer . . . and more tender. "Do you suppose . . . William Duncan Rhodes . . . that I'd have been unselfish enough to waste all that energy on a girl I would have hated?"

Doctor Rhodes reached up and turned off the porch light.

Simultaneously, there was a slight gliding movement by the fence and a shadowy form,

flitting past, melted into the grapevines. Barbara turned toward the vines. Loudly and distinctly she began it, "Keep your nose——" But Doctor Rhodes smothered the rest of the sentence under the lapel of his coat.

It was some moments later that he said: "You make me feel humble, Barbara. I'll do anything for you. . . . I'll pull up and move to a city—I'll—"

"I guess you will *not!* With as good a practice as you're getting you'll stay right here in Meadows for at least ten years."

The long, long trail stretched ahead. Little town, little business, little home, little children, little vacations, little sorrows, little joys. . . . No, not little after all. Wide as the universe, high as the stars, big as love, long as life. For the Great White Glamour lay over it all.

The Cutter family accepted the astounding news in various ways. "They're liars," was Craig's definite and honest conclusion. "Ya, big liars," Nick gave echo. Josephine was unperturbed. "I knew it all the time," she announced blandly. And when questioned,

merely made answer, "Oh, the way he *looked* at her." And they had thought her merely a little girl, uninterested and unnoticing.

Gramma's poor old head was in a whirl. "I can't keep up with her," she lamented. "She does such startling things." She called Barbara into her bedroom and carefully closed the door. "What about that man?" she asked, "Mr. Franklin B. Frazier?"

"*Who?* Oh, yes!" the girl laughed blithely. "Don't worry about him, Granny. That was just a name I happened to see on a wholesale jeweler's catalogue."

Nell was both intensely relieved at the happy adjustment and violently provoked at the thought of her worried summer. "The present generation," she declared to Ed, "is a perfect enigma!"

"The present generation," Ed responded succinctly, pointedly, "says a great many things to hear itself talk—and then it goes ahead and does just about like folks have been doing for a couple of thousand years."

CHAPTER XI

THE CHILDREN GROW UP

IN September Barbara and Doctor Rhodes were married. The Cutter children went back to school, each in a higher grade like a little chicken farther up on his roost. Josephine entered high school. It would seem that the Cutter family should settle down to a steady monotonous existence, that the weather predominating in that humble home should be clear and fair, with not much change in temperature. If there are those who believe there existed this even report, they do not yet know the disturbances which may descend, unpredicted, upon the ordinary American family where there are children.

For the history of some days is the history of a cyclone, a storm characterized by high winds rotating about a center of low atmospheric pressure. And always the mother of the family is the center.

Such a storm seemed to have struck the Cutter household on a September day. Breakfast started off gustily with Ed and Nicky consuming large quantities of buckwheat cakes and sausage, the baby eating a poached egg, Gramma expressing a desire for a little milk toast (if it wasn't too much bother), Craig demanding two fried eggs as hard as his leather leggings, and Josephine retrieving from the pantry a stray piece of pie and some cocoa.

"Cutter's Café, that's what I'm running," Nell told them disgustedly.

After breakfast there followed the usual breezy rush to get ready for school. A particularly violent gust of wind shook the household while Craig, attacking all the tables and stands like a battering-ram, hunted for his arithmetic, geography note book, a sack of marbles, and his cap.

To Nell the forenoon was one frenzied rush to get her work in shape. The baby followed her about for a half hour, whining apparently for no reason at all. By way of extra diversion there were two pies to be baked for the

church food sale. Things still seemed to be in a state of upheaval when noon and the family arrived. As a special affront to Josephine's finical nose there was codfish. Ed also emitted a cordial "Phew! smell the fish-house!" as he entered.

After the meal, a hurried, unlovely affair, the whole family became involved in the usual mad search for things lost to its various members. One was Josephine's fountain pen. "It was right here," she stormed in her vehement way. "Right on this sideboard." Then catching sight of Craig, the bright and impulsive idea shook her: "Craig's got it." At which Craig, purple-faced and swollen with the thought of his blameless life, returned, "I have not! You *shut* your *mouth!*"

Nell glared at him speechlessly. So this was the way a son of hers spoke to his sister! Blood of her blood was addressing flesh of her flesh that way. "Ed,"—she followed her husband out on the porch—"I never dreamed I'd raise a boy who wouldn't be chivalrous to his sister."

Apparently Ed was not greatly excited. "Well," he returned, "you can hardly expect boys to be gallant to a big husky girl who always demands her rights."

School was out again before Nell caught up with her work. Even then, in the midst of a hot bath, she could not escape from her everlasting care and responsibility, for Craig called through the bathroom keyhole: "*Mam*-a! Where's my old sweater, the black one with the orange collar?"

She could have cried from vexation that there was not a moment of privacy, not a minute she could call her own. "Craig," she responded from her watery berth, "there's just one place it ought to be—in your coat closet. If it's not there I don't know *where* it is—down in Peterson's pasture or over by the creek dam or up a tree in the woods. If you'd ever take care of your things— It's a good thing your *head* is fastened." But Craig was up and away like the dew of the morning. Time and tide and boys wait for no man or woman.

After the bath Nell attacked a pile of mending that contained holes which for shape boasted no illustrations in any geometry. She was in the midst of it when the boys clattered into the house, with the combined request: "We've got a dug-out in Peterson's meadow. It's swell; you ought to see it. We're frontiersmen hiding from Indians. We want something to eat—just a bite in the dug-out. Please, mama, there's just us two boys 'n' Red 'n' Heinie."

Wearily Nell Cutter buttered huge slabs of bread and put cold beef between them. She did not do it cheerfully. It was an added task to the duties that were as numberless as the sands of the sea.

"There's no sense in it," she told them impatiently, even while she complied with their demands. "I never saw the way you boys eat. If this was your supper I'd not mind so much. Will you call it your supper?"

There was a unanimous howl: "Aw, no, mama, we want waffles for supper?"

Like the whole rushed day, supper was a

half hour late. Nell cracked six eggs viciously and stirred the big waffle recipe. All during the heating of the irons and the first baking, Nicky, in gloating anticipation, hung over the stove in her way. Meanwhile, he whistled a shrill, air-piercing whistle which went through her head like the steam from a circus calliope. In one corner of the kitchen Craig teased the baby. "Your name's Leonard, not *Weonard*." To which the baby was crying lustily, "I said *Weonard*." Josephine, carelessly setting the table, added to the gayety of nations by singing a parody on the Sextette from "Lucia," distorting the lovely melody with the crude words:

"I don't like bana-a-a-a-nas and may-yun-aise."

In her tiredness, Nell sputtered to Gramma, "Gramma, I think a mother bringing up her youngsters has the hardest time of anybody in the world. There's noise and confusion just all the time, and you can't call your soul your own."

"Why, Nellie!" Gramma reproved gently.

"I think it's the very happiest time in the world. Dear, dear!" she spoke half to herself. "The tide of the years . . . how it sweeps us along!"

"Well, maybe you're right," Nell said grudgingly; "but I can't help but think you get a lot more out of life for yourself after they're raised."

Supper itself was a noisy meal and a provoking one. Josephine, taking upon herself the position of head critic to the sons of the house of Cutter, began, "Mama, Craig chews just terribly. You could hear him if you had *ear muffs* on."

To which Craig gave pleasantly forth, "Ho! ho! What about people in glass houses, Missy! You stuffed a whole half bun in your mouth . . . just *pushed* it in."

Their mother succeeded in figuratively pulling them apart, when Nicky commenced innocently enough, "Say, folks, to-day when we was up by Horners', just this side of there—"

"*No,* sir!" Craig was one of those accurate people who demand correctness in every trivial

statement. "It was the *other* side, past the telephone pole." This precipitated a tiresome discussion, which seemed to last interminably. Nell, in her weariness, sat and let it go on. If Ed didn't have gumption enough to stop it at his own table, she wouldn't either. The argument progressed right merrily until Nick's "You big hunk o' cheese!" which was evidently too much even for Ed, who said sternly, "That will do now, boys." They subsided, although Craig whispered, "*Other* side," like the last shot from ambush.

After supper there were lessons. Josephine did not understand part of her algebra. While attempting to show her, Nell found occasion to deliver herself of "It isn't *my* lesson, Josephine. You have the air of doing me a great favor. I don't know why you should adopt that condescending manner. Ed, what are teachers *for?* It seems to me that all my life I've been teaching my youngsters at home so they could go to school and recite. I hope the time will come when they will *reverse* the situation. . . . I'm sure I—"

But Ed was reading to the two boys and paid no attention to Nell's discourse. Usually this masculine group presented a lovely and loving spectacle, but to-night the feud was not over. Nicky, with a lasting grievance, tapped Craig's foot irritatingly, to which Craig made brotherly reply with the systematic snapping of a rubber band.

Bedtime arriving, a prolonged and heated discussion arose as to which of two clocks, all of seven minutes apart, was correct. Reaching, like many a congressman, no conclusion to the wordy debate, they went to bed. Ensconced therein they said the peaceful prayer which little Jacob and Esau may have prayed by the side of Rebecca. To be sure, Craig's contained an extra line which never appeared in the original:

"Now I lamey down to sleep
I pray the Lor' my sou' to keep
'Fi sh' die before I wake
I pray the Lor' my sou' to take—
Lay over, you crazy nut. . . ."

Nell Cutter sighed and said nothing corrective. It was as though the Lord could accept the unexpurgated copy, or leave it alone —just as He wished. She washed her hands of the whole affair.

When she returned to the living room she heard Ed expressing himself to Gramma: "A person can't seem to get anything done here in the way of consecutive reading. I've tried for three nights now to look up something about hemp in the encyclopedia."

"My goodness, Ed," Nell put in, "*you* ought to stand them in the evening. Talk about reading—it's the only time of day I *could* read, and then there are always a dozen things to do. I'm sure I'd like to keep up my music. Right now, when I'd like to read this new Wells book, I've got to fix Nicky's suspenders and Josephine's—"

She broke off to glare at the floor. "Mud!" she exploded. "A great big mammoth chunk of dried mud *on my living-room rug!* Can you beat it? Well, I must say I clean and scrub all the time. I'm getting to be a perfect slave

. . . a regular doormat for the whole family—"

When Nell went to bed, she could hear the thump, thump of Nicky's legs against the wall, as restless in sleep as they were in waking. Josephine, having smuggled an old magazine to bed with her, got up to prowl around after another number.

"Settle down, Josephine," her mother called irritably. "Can't this house ever get quiet?"

When all was still again, the shadowy, pajama-clothed wraith of Craig stood in the doorway: "Mama," it whispered, "I feel kind a like maybe I might *throw up.*"

"No, you don't," she said in exasperation. "You just think you do." Craig apparently accepted this noble mental attitude of his mother at its face value and went back to bed.

Tired tears, foolish and futile, wet Nell Cutter's pillow. Not in genuine sorrow were they shed, but in self-pity that the children took so much of her time, leaned so heavily upon her. She was like a tree with all the branches

sapping at her very roots. Mrs. Ramsey's time, now, was all her own. She could close the door of her immaculate home and run up to Dale City to all the plays and musicales more easily than Nell herself could go away for an hour. Charlotte Gray-Cooper, too! How carefree and irresponsible she was! Neither of these women had their days filled with a thousand infinitesimal things which, taken all together, were like a swarm of gnats to cloud the sun. It would be years before she herself could do all the things she wanted to do. Ed didn't understand that side of her life. Well, if he had to see to all the countless duties that she did. . . . There . . . after all . . . she'd forgotten to mend . . . Nicky's suspenders. . . .

Nell Cutter slept at last. Rose, in the morning, to meet another day full of work and responsibility. Slept again; and again wakened to meet other days . . . and others . . . and others. . . .

And then, quite suddenly, so stealthily does

Time, the prowler, creep upon us and steal our precious hours away, it was years later. It did not seem like years afterward . . . it seemed only a few months. It did not seem true that Josephine had been married for three days, that Craig was ready to take a modest little position in his uncle's bank, that Nicky was to start to the university, that the baby was eleven. But it was a fact as indisputable as unbelievable.

The confusion of the wedding was over. All of Meadows had been there—all but Gramma, who neither came nor sent a gift. But it took neither her presence nor her gifts to remember Gramma, whose spirit, like a sweet fragrance, was to fill all their lives.

Months before, Nell Cutter had made an effort to stay her daughter's affair with "Oh, Josephine, it's your whole life. How do you know Arthur is the right man?" To which Josephine had returned from the depths of her finite wisdom, "How did *you* know Mr. Edward Cutter was the right man?" How indeed! Nell had made no further resistance

while her little girl swept out of her hands like a wild bird that she could not hold.

She had seen Josephine, a lovely Josephine, with all the old brusque corners rubbed down into graciousnes, go down the walk—a bride. She had made no outcry, had done or said nothing sentimental, holding herself together practically. She had a feeling that if she said or did anything besides mere commonplaces something inside of her would break, some frozen dam would burst its confines, and she would turn into a shrieking wild woman or a Niobe to weep herself to death.

It had taken three days to get the house back into shape, and the gifts packed and sent. And now this was the day she and Ed were to take the boys to Dale City to begin their work. Everything was happening at once. The disruption of the Cutter family this September seemed complete. Never before had such a cataclysm of change struck the household. Even Leonard was to be left at his Uncle Sammie's to stay all night with them and return home the next afternoon.

It was late forenoon by the time they were all ready to go. Nell gathered herself together and went down the old walk to the new sedan. She was remembering the time when Craig and Nicky had both squeezed into the front seat of the old car with their father. How big they were now! Craig was larger than Ed. How good-looking they were, too, and how scrupulously clean! Nicky took a cloth from under the seat and dusted it before sitting down—Nicky, who once had been led to water by the ear!

In that numb, frozen way, as though she were an onlooker in a tragedy, Nell Cutter rode to Dale City with her boys. She spoke of the apple-laden trees and the heavy growth of goldenrod, and did not care whether there were apples or goldenrod in the world.

They left Craig down town, where he was to live, and then took Nicky out to a dormitory at the university. All that their mother said in those last moments had to do with baggage and boarding houses and inanimate things, while her heart was the heart of Rachel crying

out in the wilderness for her children . . . and would not be comforted.

When they left the boys, Ed wanted to know if Nell would like to go to a movie. She did not want to go. She wanted to get back to the sanctuary of the old house. But sensing that Ed and Lennie wanted to go, she acquiesced. There was a girl in the picture that reminded her of Josephine. She wished she had told Josephine more about life . . . warned her of all the little heartaches she might meet.

After the show they took Lennie around by Uncle Sammie's farm. All the way Nell Cutter sat alone in the back seat with her thoughts for company. At home again, Ed handed her the key with a cheerful "Well, Nellie, I expect you'll be lonesome for a while; but you'll have a lot more freedom now."

She turned on him a drawn, stricken face, "Oh, Ed, what *is* freedom?"

Up the old brick walk she went alone, a thousand clutching hands pulling at her heart. There were boards still nailed in the crotch of

an old apple tree. It had been Josephine's favorite playhouse. Just a few days ago, it seemed, she had sat there with a family of paper dolls stuck in the branches. A sled hanging lopsidedly on the cob house door had been Nicky's. A half-broken slide near by had taken weeks of Craig's time to make. It seemed only yesterday that he had thrown down the hammer and saw. Where had the time gone?

She unlocked the door and went in. Stena had finished her work and left. The house was immaculate . . . and very still. Nell Cutter took off her hat and sat down in a big chair in the living room. *There was nothing to do.*

For a long time she sat, inert, apathetic. The piano beckoned her. Books from their cases called to her. There was time for them both now, but no incentive to touch them. There was opportunity to do what she wished, but she seemed destitute of desires. There was only one thing in the world she wanted: to call back her little children and live it all

over again. Every grievance, every cross word, every impatient gesture came back like boomerangs to hurt her. "I was not a good mother," she told herself. But it was not true. The best mothers are not self-satisfied. They are very humble.

That night Nell Cutter went quietly to bed. She shed no tears. She lay still in that cold, stony way, as numb as though there were a bodily paralysis upon her! She was like a tree, a tree that bled at every pore.

Ed made a few semicheerful remarks: "Now, don't get up in the morning, Nell; there isn't the slightest reason for it. Just lie in bed and have a good rest." Then, he, too, lapsed into silence. Nell wondered if he slept. She said nothing to him about the children. Later she would talk about them, but not now.

All night long she lay passively. The doors of the other bedrooms were closed. No sound came from them but that sound of stillness which was louder to her heart than ever noise had been.

Ed rose early and dressed. She, too, got up and dressed mechanically. Maybe if she went about her work that horrible stone inside her would release its heavy weight. She decided to make waffles for Ed. She herself wanted nothing, but Ed must not suffer from neglect. How Nicky loved waffles! She brought six eggs out of the pantry, suddenly realized the enormity of the number, and put five of them back. Was there such a thing as making a few waffles with one egg, she wondered. All her recipes would have to be revised.

The two ate breakfast. During the process Ed made three vapid remarks: That it was a nice day; that the shower in the night had freshened things; and that Lennie would be along about two o'clock, he guessed. Nell said it certainly was; that it certainly had; and that she guessed so too. Each time she forced herself to answer with a dull little push to her voice to get the words out.

The noon meal was much the same. At two o'clock Leonard came bounding in to relieve

the monotony, but left immediately with the neighborhood boys for the Peterson pasture. The afternoon dragged miserably. Everything stayed clean. Nothing got out of place. But the old house mourned in its loneliness. Every room grieved in its desolation. The silence, the vast stillness, was a living, breathing thing that suffocated her.

She started supper a half hour earlier than usual, to have something to do. While she was setting the table Ed came home from the office. He was smiling, the creases around his eyes crinkling in their old way. He put his hand in his pocket and took out some letters. With a little gasp Nell pounced upon them—these little white messengers from away. There were three. One was neatly directed in a businesslike hand, Craig's. One showed a bold piratical flourish of ink, Nicky's. One had a silver monogram, dainty and artistic, Josephine's new initials.

For just a moment Nell Cutter hesitated, not knowing which to open first, so evenly were her affections distributed. They are

wrong who think an only child receives more love than the individuals of a bigger flock.

She tore avidly into Josephine's and skimmed it over, reading little hurried snatches here and there to Ed. It closed: ". . . loved my old home, have just the tenderest memories of it and the good times there. But oh, Mother, you know how it is, don't you? This little bungalow with my own things and my own way and my own Arthur—there's nothing like it in the world."

Then Craig's: ". . . am going in for a regular spasm of saving my money. I feel pretty chesty to be my own boss; but don't you worry, Mother, I'll be the model son you paddled me up to be."

And Nicky's: ". . . and so everything starts off with a bang, fine and dandy."

The father and mother, half smiling, half tearful, handed the three first letters back and forth.

"*Mam*-a!" The summons came so peremptorily from the back of the house that Nell, startled, hurried away. On the clean porch

Leonard stood, balancing unsteadily on his toes, small clods of mud dropping sluggishly from his uptilted heels. A string of little boys dangled behind him like the tail of an animated kite.

"Say, mom!" he was breathless, but enthusiastic, "can't we have some sandwiches to take down into Peterson's meadow? We've got a swell fort and two lookout posts in the trees. We want to eat just a little lunch in the fort, just a few sandwiches, please, mama. There ain't many of us," he explained modestly, "just me 'n' Bob 'n' Shorty 'n' Slim 'n' Bill." Then, as two rumpled tow heads peered around the corner, he added apologetically, " 'n' Dick 'n' Tony."

Nell Cutter threw back her head and laughed, the first free-hearted laughter she had had in days. As the words came back, strangely familiar, borne on the breeze of memories, something inside of her melted, the stone released her from its terrible weight. She looked at the long line of solemn, hungry little boys. To feed them it would take two

loaves of bread, an appalling amount of butter, a jar of jam, a half hour of time, and an infinite amount of patience. Ah, well! How the years slipped away! Craig and Nicky and Red and Heinie were all scattered and gone now; and yet here was the baby and his neighborhood crowd at the same old things. . . . Eternal Boyhood forever playing in the meadows of the world.

"Yes, I'll do it," Nell Cutter said, "if you'll promise one thing."

"We promise," Leonard answered glibly.

Nell Cutter smiled wryly, wistfully, to hide the tremble of her lips: "That you won't grow up while I'm spreading the bread and butter."

Ed and Nell sat down to their supper. "Now I'm going to stop mourning," Nell said cheerfully. "The children are all well and strong and clean, and happy in doing the very things they most want to do. It's what we raised them *for*. And we'll have Lennie for a while, thank goodness! But I wish I had some way of telling mothers how they clutter up their lives with worries that aren't worth

while. If I could just make myself into a broadcasting station I'd tell mothers all over the world, just as Gramma used to tell me, that, if they only realized it, their very happiest time is when the children are all little and making them the most work."

Across the table Ed and Nell Cutter, alone, faced each other, as they had done twenty-four years before. Two middle-aged people are a pitiful number to sit down to a meal. But there were others there . . . invisible guests . . . held by the cords of affection. You cannot break the radii which stretch out from the center of a good home. They are the most flexible things in the world. They reach out into every port where a child has sailed, into every country where a child has strayed—these radii of love. They pull at the hearts of the children until, sometime, somewhere, they draw the wanderers all back into the family circle.

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